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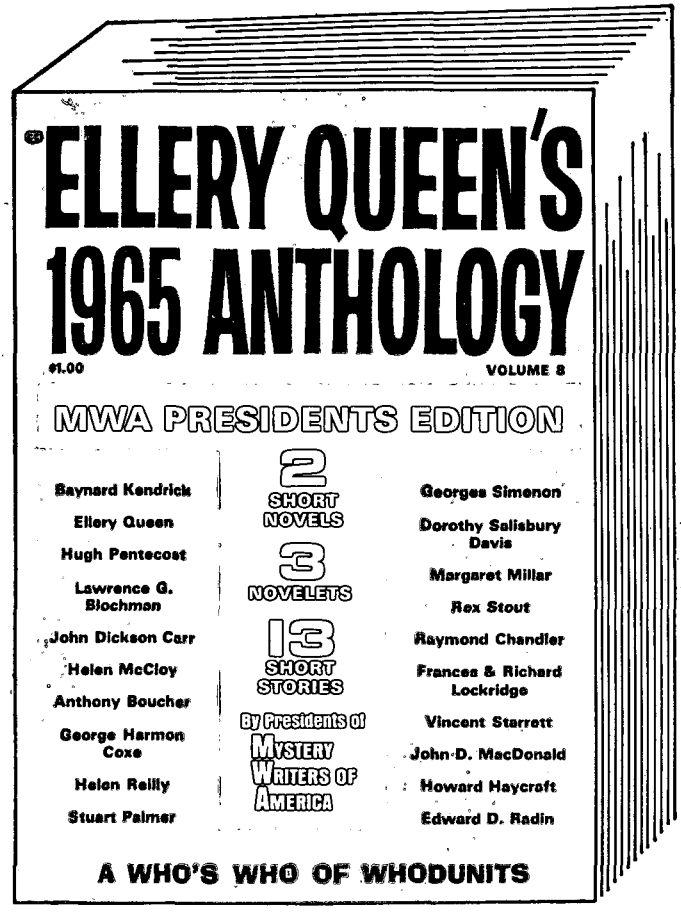

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a new police procedural story

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **LAWRENCE TREAT**

TITLE: ***C As in Cop***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Mitch Taylor

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Even though Mitch Taylor was on the Homicide Squad, once a year he had to put on his old patrolman's uniform and make like a cop—on Election Day. But once a detective, always a detective . . .*

FOR A COP LIKE MITCH TAYLOR, Election Day was something special—only the wrong way round. Because orders were to put on a uniform and stand watch at the polls—to make sure nobody tried to pull any funny stuff.

So, even though Mitch was on the Homicide Squad, he had to yank his old pants and tunic out of the back of the closet, where Amy kept them in a moth bag. She'd brushed them out the day before, but she hadn't got rid of all the camphor smell, and it almost knocked him over.

It was something of a job to squeeze into those pants, too; but he managed it before Amy got up, and he took a peek at himself in the mirror. He saw a chesty guy with not too much blubber on him, dark eyes and stiff wavy hair—and a uniform that really didn't fit any more.

He wasn't what you'd call comfortable in it. The collar was too high and rubbed his neck; the jacket was definitely on the tight side; and whether the buttons would hold out for the day was anybody's guess.

When Mitch stepped into the kitchen to fix breakfast for Mamie and little Joey, the kids gave him a

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look he couldn't quite make out. It was sort of surprised—but he couldn't tell if they were proud of him or a little ashamed because their old man turned out to be nothing but a uniformed patrolman. Or maybe the camphor smell got them too.

Anyhow, they just nudged each other and didn't open their traps except to ask could they have that guava jelly today like on Sunday. He said sure, why not?

He left early, even before Amy shoveled the kids off to school, and she came to the door with him.

"Funny thing," he said to her, patting his tunic, "how this wool stuff shrinks."

She burst out laughing. "Mitchell," she said, "you look just like a brand-new rookie. You better make sure nobody steals your badge."

"Who, me?" he said, staring hard and kind of pulling her toward him with his eyes.

"Yes," she said, "you!" And she gave him the kind of kiss that stays with you clear until you get home in the evening.

It was one of those raw cloudy days in November when it was probably snowing a little in New York; but out here the weather couldn't make up its mind what it wanted to be, except dirty.

Mitch did his own voting first, and no straight ticket, either. A friend of a friend of his was running for State Senator but with the wrong party, which meant Mitch had to study all the names on the voting machine and make sure he pulled the right levers.

After that he had some stuff to buy—there were always Election Day Specials at the department stores and he stocked up on haberdashery and things. When he'd finished, it was nearly time to start off for his assignment.

He took a 4-B bus. It wasn't his regular one, but 4-B went to the north end of town where he was due to report. He found a crowd waiting at the bus stop. Mitch didn't particularly notice anybody; he stood aside and watched them all pile in as if there was a prize for being first. As a result Mitch was the last one on the bus.

He pushed forward to the front and stood there spraddle-legged, staring out the windshield. Being a friendly guy who liked to shoot the breeze, he said something to the driver about it being a hell of a day for an election. The driver said every day was a hell of a day, election or no election, and the city ought to buy some more buses only they wouldn't fork out the dough. Bunch of crooks running this town, the driver said; but they'd get themselves voted back in, same as always.

Mitch said "Yeah" a couple of times in his high-pitched voice, but the driver must have had a fight with his wife that morning, or maybe he'd bet on the wrong horse. All he was interested in was, could he slam the door in somebody's face and make it look like he hadn't done

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it on purpose. And to top it all off, the driver had to go and crack wise about that camphor smell and how the moths maybe had good sense, because they stayed away from it. After that, Mitch gave up on the guy and quit talking.

He watched traffic for a while and then he gazed at this ad that said you could have women falling all over you if you used the right kind of hair cream. Then, because he couldn't stand that kind of hooey, he let his mind go over some of the stuff posted on the bulletin board, down at headquarters.

There were the makes and numbers of a bunch of stolen cars and Mitch could rattle off at least six of them; there was the cat burglar working the Turkey Hill section and nobody had seen him; and there was this holdup guy that slugged gas station attendants at night, without warning, and one of them had died, so the guy was a killer and the only description they had was he was so ugly you could hardly believe it. Then there was a Chicago hood holed up in town and they had a picture of him; and an arsonist with a beatnik beard who laughed like a horse; and a little pickpocket who worked the buses and stepped on his victims' feet and apologized, which was when he was making the dip.

Mitch had been up in the lab yesterday with his friend Jub Freeman, who ran it, and Jub was working mostly on shoes. He had casts of shoes and pictures of shoes, and he had walking patterns and even a busted shoelace. It went that way sometimes, in streaks.

The arsonist had stepped in some soft mud and the killer had stepped in an oil slick and the cat burglar had stepped in some flowerbeds, so they were all tagged. The arsonist wore size 10 and probably limped, the cat burglar wore size 12 and used a brand-new pair of sneakers on every job, and the killer wore size 7 with what looked like steel toe-plugs, which maybe made him a tap dancer. Anyhow, all the shoe-repair men were being canvassed and all the shoe stores had been alerted, and maybe the Homicide Squad would get somewhere—and then again maybe it wouldn't.

Mitch let all these things float through his mind—the cases he'd be working on tomorrow and the stuff he might run across any time. But they were future headaches, so none of it bothered him now. Today he had this voting booth assignment and it was a sort of vacation. Just sit around and watch. People seeing him there in uniform, it practically guaranteed nothing would happen.

He got off the bus at the end of the line and started out. It was a run-down neighborhood where they'd had plenty of trouble, but nothing big. Teen-age gangs, mostly, and a few bar fights. But the bars were closed today, and Mitch walked past the garages and machine shops and past a couple of cheap apart-

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ment houses, and then this dame came running after him.

"Officer!" she called out. "Officer!"

He was hooked on account of the uniform, but whatever she wanted, he'd try and turn it over to the local precinct. Still with a half hour or so to spare, how could he slide out of listening?

She was maybe in her forties and attractive enough, except she still had her hair up in curlers and the pins stuck out all over. She was out of breath from running after him, and she grabbed his arm as if she needed support. She had tiny hands with short, rather ugly fingers, and the nails were painted green.

"Officer," she said, panting. "They're down there again, with my boy. They're ruining him, you have to take him away and teach him a lesson."

"Take it easy," he said. "What's the trouble?"

"That gang," she said, and her voice rose. "They're in the cellar, and God knows what they do down there. They're ruining him, they're no good. Better he's arrested and gets punished. They'll teach him bad things—with girls, with gambling, with dope. My baby boy!"

"Lady," Mitch said, "we can't arrest anybody unless they commit a crime."

"Gambling's a crime," she said. She spoke as if she knew her way around. "A floating crap game, it started yesterday but I just found out where it is. You have to stop it, and save my boy."

She had him on that one—he couldn't refuse to break up a crap game, but he wasn't going to make any arrests and have to follow them up in court. But he figured it out right away: he'd find out a little more from her and then he'd go over to this cellar and make plenty of noise on the way so that they'd know he was coming. Then he'd find nothing, and go straight on to the polling place with no worries hanging over him.

"How old is this boy of yours?" he asked.

"Tommy's only sixteen, he's my youngest. He wants to join this club, but it's a gang and they're up to no good, I tell you. They loaf around all day and all night, and you have to stop it."

"You show me where they are," Mitch said. "If there's anything wrong, I'll take care of it." She looked relieved and he figured it would only take a few minutes to handle this and get her off his back, and he'd make her feel good, besides. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Pauline Reade, and I live over there, in that apartment house. 1709 Hart Street."

"Yeah" Mitch said. "Let's go."

Actually, he felt kind of sorry for her. Here she had this stinker of a son and she expected a cop to fix everything up just by hauling the kid in. Was she really that dumb?

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It was a job for the juvenile bureau, and all Mitch wanted was to go through the motions without starting something.

He let her take him around the corner and point to a ramp going down to the basement of a brick apartment house. The ramp had an iron railing, and there was a steel door at the bottom of it with a small window. Mitch hoped they had a lookout there, to warn them if a cop was coming. That was why he stopped at the head of the ramp and spoke to this Reade female.

"You better stay here," he said, speaking loud so that his voice would carry. "What did you say your boy's name is? And what's he look like?"

"Tom, and he's tall and handsome and has blond hair and blue eyes, and he's wearing a blue woolen shirt."

"I'll take care of him," Mitch said. He rapped the iron rail a couple of times, to make some more noise, and then started down the ramp. He walked with a heavy solid tread, and when he got to the bottom of the incline he turned around and called to her.

"Just wait there," he said. He kicked at the door and gave the knob a good rattle. He heard them scurrying around inside, then the bang of a chair and the clang of metal. A coin dropped. Voices were muffled, somebody wisecracked, and somebody else laughed in a short nervous burst.

He figured they'd had time to put away the dice and anything else that they didn't want a cop to see, so he said, "Open up." He turned the knob, gave the door a kick, and stepped inside.

The cellar was badly lit—only two or three low-wattage bulbs, and after the daylight it took him a few seconds to adjust. He saw a bunch of teen-age kids, eighteen or nineteen years old mostly, wearing work pants folded up high at the cuffs, and either wool shirts or leather jackets. There were a couple of chairs around and a pile of clothes on the floor, and at the back of the big room was a boiler with the section behind it curtained off.

Mitch knew right away he shouldn't have come in alone.

"You guys voted yet?" he said in his tenor. He figured maybe they'd laugh and it would break the ice; but he was all wrong. They took the remark as an insult, and didn't answer. They just moved closer together. Nine or ten of them, and the only blond one was wearing a yellow shirt and a jacket over it.

"Just looking for Tommy Reade," Mitch said. "He in here?"

It was one of those times when things could go either way. They could have said no and let it go at that, and Mitch would have said something about Tom's mother wanted to see him, and they should tell him if they saw him around, and then Mitch could have turned and walked out.

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But instead, some slob-nosed punk up and said, "Yeah, that's me." He nudged the kid next to him, and that kid said the same thing, "Yeah, that's me." And then one by one, all of them went into the act and pretended he was Tom Reade. Which was the same as giving Mitch the needle, but good. So he knew he had to ease out of it as if it was all a big joke, or else he had to step on them and let them know they couldn't get away with a stunt like that. Not to a cop, anyhow.

Mitch tried the easy way first. "Lay off," he said. "Why don't you break it up and move out of here? It's a nice day outside, you ought to be outdoors."

"Who says?" one of them snapped.

Mitch heard the click of a switchblade snap open, and he saw hands slide into pockets. A couple of the kids picked up empty Coke bottles and pretended they were going to drink, and somebody grabbed a piece of pipe and hefted it. There was no chance of passing it off as a joke—not now.

Mitch could have pulled his gun and backed out, but that would have meant they'd put it over on him and that he looked scared. And besides, when you pull a gun you sometimes have to use it, and the smart thing was still to soft-pedal the whole business if possible, to slide out of it or laugh it off or switch it into something else.

"Who's the leader around here?" Mitch asked. And again the whole bunch of them went into this act, one saying, "Me, me." They'd hit on something smart; they'd figured out a way to bait a cop and they weren't letting go of it that easy; they were on top of Mitch and enjoying it.

"For a clubhouse," Mitch said, "this place isn't too hot. You guys ever think of fixing it up?"

"It's fixed," the kid at one end said. "Come on in and look around."

"Yeah, step right in," another kid said. And the chorus took it up. "Come in. All the way. Right to the back."

They were riding Mitch hard, and right now it was touch and go whether one of them wouldn't go too far, say the wrong thing, heave something, start a fight, trigger off the hysteria that would make headlines for tomorrow and start a major investigation.

Mitch turned away, deliberately disregarding them, acting as if he didn't give a damn, wasn't even bothered.

He spotted a pair of rope quoits on the ledge of the basement window near him, and he moved over and picked them up. One of them was busted and the other was twisted out of shape.

"You guys play?" he said trying to knead the twisted one back into shape.

"We don't play games," somebody said. And somebody else said, "Quoit right."

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That brought a laugh, a big one, as if the kid had said something real funny. Mitch, still working the quoit and pretending that it was all he was interested in, said, "I used to be a champ. Never missed."

For a couple of seconds they couldn't exactly figure out why they'd suddenly lost out on needling him, and it left them kind of up in the air. Then one of the kids snapped out, "Give it here, copper."

Mitch looked up. With a shrug he tossed the quoit at the kid and took two steps sideways and backward, toward the entrance.

"Want me to close the door or leave it open?" he asked.

Somebody hooted and somebody else gave him a Bronx cheer, and then they were off and out of control. But Mitch, edging away, jumped back and slammed the door after him. He heard something hit the door on the inside and smash, but by that time he was out in the alley and safe, and nobody'd been hurt and he hadn't forced the issue.

But what it came down to was, they'd made a jackass out of him and he'd have to do something about it. Maybe get hold of a couple of radio cops and walk in there in force and show them the police meant business. Take away those knives and send the gang on home. They'd been all steamed up when they'd faced a single cop, but they'd quiet down once they saw they had no chance.

Mitch turned around, took a deep breath, and walked briskly up the ramp to where Mrs. Reade was still waiting.

"Your kid isn't in there," Mitch said.

"But he is, I know it!"

"Look," Mitch said. "I don't belong around here. I done you a favor and what I want right now is, you put in a police call and tell them you want a patrol car. Okay?"

"Yes, but something did happen! My boy—"

"Nothing happened, and he's not there. Now don't get all excited about nothing. I ran into something else, so you just do like I say, huh?"

She nodded as if she still didn't believe him, and he watched her cross the street and head for a phone.

The patrol car came in three minutes, and Mitch identified himself and explained what had happened and what he was after—which was showing this gang they couldn't get away with making monkeys out of policemen.

"We just go in there and act tough," Mitch said, "and tell them to beat it. No arrests, nothing to follow up. All you report is, I asked you to send these teen-agers home and you done it."

They understood; they knew all about this bunch and they knew who Tom Reade was. "We rounded him up a couple of times," one of the cops said, "and the Lieutenant talked to him, but the kid's no good. He's headed for real trouble."

The raid went off like clockwork.

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pretty much the way Mitch figured it would. The sight of three cops walking together scared the daylights out of the gang, and they marched out with their eyes down and their lips buttoned tight.

Once the place was empty, Mitch took a look around. It was no clubhouse, and there was no sign that the gang used it regularly. There was this curtain in the back, behind the boiler, but Mitch didn't want to snoop in there. Chances were that the super had a comfortable chair hidden behind the curtain, and maybe a radio alongside it, so he could sit down and catch a couple of innings of a ball game when he was supposed to be on duty.

So Mitch didn't bother looking. Besides, he was getting sick of the place, and with no ventilation that camphor smell of his was beginning to take over, and besides, it was time to get going to the voting booths.

Then he heard the sneeze behind the curtain—a big sneeze that echoed through the basement, and then a series of smaller ones. Mitch pulled back the curtain, and there was this blond kid wearing a blue woolen shirt, and he was hunched up on a couch and he sure looked scared.

Mitch went over and grabbed him, and the kid tried to swing at him. Mitch ducked, and as he jerked out of the way he felt something rip. Then he bulled in close and got the kid by the wrist. Mitch twisted it around, and the kid was helpless. He was shaking like a leaf and he breathed in short quick gasps, like maybe he had asthma.

Mitch eased up on his grip. "You're Tommy Reade?" he asked.

The kid didn't answer. He just glared at Mitch and then knocked himself out with another sneeze, and Mitch half lifted him up and started walking him outside. What struck Mitch was that when he'd first come in, after the gang had put away their dice because they heard a cop coming, this kid was the only one that went and hid. So he must have had a reason.

Outside, the two cops were still talking to Mrs. Reade. But when she saw Mitch come out with her boy, she ran down and started yelling at him—how the kid was no good and ought to go back to school or get a job or something.

Mitch felt sort of sorry for him. With a mother babying him like that, no wonder he was sore at the world. Sending a cop for him when he was with his friends—how did she expect him to take it, anyhow?

Mitch watched. The kid had a hangdog look, but otherwise he was okay. Seemed smart enough, nice looks, good enough build. Same small hands and feet as his mother, so—so what?

More or less to save the kid from his old lady and give him the prestige of a real arrest, as if he were grown up, Mitch stepped between them.

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"That's enough," he said. "We're taking him in."

When Mitch and his camphor smell came near the kid, he started sneezing all over again. But no matter how scared he was, which was plenty, he was glad to be free of his ma, and there wasn't even a peep out of him when Mitch turned him over to the patrol car.

"Bring him down to headquarters," Mitch said. "He can cool off down there. Me, I got to report over at the polling place."

The patrolmen didn't like doing errands for a Homicide man, and they wanted out. "What do we book him for?" they asked.

"Resisting an officer," Mitch said. "Put yourself down for an assist, and I'll call in and set things up. That way, you won't have any trouble."

They went reluctantly, but Mrs. Reade had second thoughts about her kid.

"I didn't mean to do all that to him," she said. "I just wanted to teach him a lesson. You won't be too hard on him, will you?"

"You asked for it," Mitch said. He was still not too sure of himself. Booking a juvenile on a charge of resisting an officer—that could be a mistake. Except why had the kid hidden behind the curtain? He must have had a reason, and Mitch couldn't help being curious about it.

Mrs. Reade kept on talking. "Tommy's not a bad boy," she said. "He just pretends he is. He's always pretending. Ever since he was a little boy, he pretends. He used to wear costumes. One day he was an Indian and the next day he was a pirate."

"Yeah," Mitch said. "That's how kids are."

"But he was different. He was trying to be somebody else. Even now when he's grown up, he still pretends. That's why he has all those masks. A whole collection of rubber masks. He goes around and tries to frighten people."

"No kidding," Mitch said. "Where does he do that?"

"Around the house, and maybe when he goes out, too. How do I know what he does when he goes out? Except that I don't like the company he keeps."

"What does he do for dough?" Mitch asked.

"I don't know. Maybe gambling, because he always seems to have plenty. And at his age, it isn't right. I'm afraid he'll do something really bad."

She could say that again, Mitch thought, and maybe he was on to something.

As soon as he got rid of her, he called Lieutenant Decker at headquarters and explained his idea.

"This kid I sent in," Mitch said. "I figure you better have a talk with him."

"About what?"

"About that slugging. This killer—they all say he's so ugly you can't believe it. What it could be is a rubber mask. And this kid, he's got

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a collection of them. And something else, Lieutenant: he's got small feet and he was hiding. It kind of adds up."

"I'll look into it," the Lieutenant said.

"And try to find out where he gets his dough. Because a kid like that don't make it on the dice. That's where he loses it."

"Right," Decker said.

So Mitch was riding high. He took his jacket off, shook it out, and gave it a good airing, which helped. He saw where the shoulder seam had come apart when he'd grabbed the kid, and closed it up with a safety pin. He could get by if he didn't move his arm around too much, and he'd have to remember to keep his back to the wall as much as possible. Anyhow, he looked all right from the front, and that was what counted most.

At twelve noon he reported for duty. The polling place turned out to be a real estate office, and it was nice and comfortable, with plenty of chairs. The watchers were okay; nobody mentioned camphor, and the voting was light and everything was friendly.

Mitch, sitting on his backside and doing his duty for democracy, was content. Let the Lieutenant handle this Reade kid while Mitch relaxed. Just kidding around and letting the volunteer workers bring in coffee and sandwiches. No interruptions and nothing to bother him—until he got the phone call from the Lieutenant.

"This kid you sent up," the Lieutenant said. "He claims you gave him sneezing powder. I had him in here but all he could do was sneeze, so we sent him to a clinic. For nose drops or something."

"He's got an allergy, maybe," Mitch said. "But what about that slugging? And his shoes?"

"He wears size eight and a half," the Lieutenant said. "A six would kill him. And he wants to sue you for false arrest, and maybe he should."

"He's a minor," Mitch said, thinking fast. "He can't sue, and his mother told me to arrest him."

"Brother!" the Lieutenant said. "You sure were obliging."

All of which knocked Mitch down a few pegs, on account he should have known that Tom Reade was still wet behind the ears and didn't have the confidence or the nerve to go out and knock off a few filling stations. Still, Mitch couldn't quite give up on his notion.

The afternoon dragged along. When someone came in to vote, Mitch stood up, because it looked better. The election inspectors would call out the name to each other and check it off, and then the voter would sign the register and go into the booth to vote, and that was all there was to it.

Mitch didn't pay much attention to who they were, and he didn't even half look at this guy until they

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sang out his name. "Arthur Reade, 1709 Hart."

Mitch perked up.

Arthur Reade was bent over the register and had his back to Mitch, and Mitch remembered Mrs. Reade had called Tom her youngest. So this was either her husband or her son, and from the back of his head and the way he moved, he didn't seem old enough to be her husband. Which made him Tom's brother, and worth a second look.

The guy stood up without turning around and went straight into the booth and pulled the curtain. All Mitch could see was his feet, small ones, and they moved around nervously, rubbing the toes, scuffing, never standing still. Those small hands and feet, all the Reades had them.

Mitched picked up a cup of coffee and crossed the room. He felt tight and kind of keyed up. When he was in front of the booth he made himself stumble, and as he jerked up he spilled his whole cup of coffee on the floor.

He turned to the inspectors and said, as if he were ashamed of himself, "Geez, how'd I do that? All over my pants, too."

"I'll clean it up," one of the women watchers said.

Mitch shook his head. "Forget it, I'll take care of it." But he went to the other side of the room and waited.

After about a half minute the curtain was pulled back, the lever clicked, and the vote was registered. Arthur Reade came out, saw that the puddle was too big to go around, and so he had to step into it as he went out.

Mitch stared. The shoe print, clear and small and fresh, showed the steel toe-plug pretty much the same as up in Jub Freeman's lab. Mitch went over to the phone and called the Lieutenant. Then, grinning, Mitch cleaned up the mess.

At 6:30 the phone rang and they said it was for Mitch. He picked it up and said, "Taylor, Homicide."

"Decker," came the Lieutenant's voice. "We picked up Arthur Reade right after your call and we've had him here ever since. You hit it on the nail. It's him all right. Used his kid brother's masks, and the kid handled the car on the last job. We got 'em both. Nice work, Taylor."

"It kind of figured," Mitch said modestly. "The way the mother was on that kid's neck, she didn't want him to be like his older brother."

"We're still getting the details," Decker said. "He pulled a whole string of holdups. Like I said, nice work. See you in the morning."

"Sure," Mitch said. He'd been afraid for a moment that he'd have to come down to headquarters after the polls closed, which would mean he'd be up most of the night. But that worry never materialized.

The only other thing that bothered him was this rip in his uniform

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and whether he'd have to spend his own dough for a new one. Still, that was a whole year off—not till next Election Day.

When he got home he showed the uniform to Amy. "Had to arrest some kid," he said, "and ripped a seam while I was doing it. Take a look, back of the shoulder."

She examined it expertly, then started to laugh. "It's nothing," she said, "but do you realize how lucky you were?"

"You bet I do," he said, remembering how he wouldn't have tumbled to anything if that kid hadn't sneezed because of the camphor smell.

But Amy had a different thought. "Just think of it!" she said, still laughing. "Supposing you'd split your pants!"

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a *detective* SHORT NOVEL by

GEORGE HARMON COXE

This short novel—complete in this issue—starts with an apparent mugging of Kent Murdock, press photographer and amateur detective, and from that explosive opening it is action all the way . . . Meet a portrait painter who is a whizbang with the ladies; his unhappy wife who is obviously hiding a secret; a night-club owner who used to be in the rackets; his unhappy sister who is also hiding a secret; and assorted suspects and other detectives, private and professional—all in a taut, fast-moving short novel expertly told by one of the real "old pros" of the "grandest game in the world" . . .

SEED OF SUSPICION

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

KENT MURDOCK HAD NO IDEA HE was being followed. Even later, when he had a chance to think things over, he had no way of knowing whether the man picked him up as he left the office, or stepped out of the shadows as Murdock passed on his way to his Marlborough Street apartment.

It was not late—it had been just ten o'clock when he left the photographic studio at the *Times-Clarion*—and he had been too preoccupied with his thoughts to take notice of those who passed him on the street. To him it was just another night, colder than most, with a damp rawness in the air that promised snow before long, and he walked briskly but unhurriedly, a rangy, moderately tall man, with good shoulders and an erect but easy way of holding himself.

He was between Newbury and Commonwealth when it happened. There was no warning but a sudden rush of footsteps behind him, and in the instant that he became aware of them, and tried to turn, he saw only darkness in the deserted street and the high brick wall enclosing someone's town house and yard.

Then the arm clamped tight about his neck, yanking him off balance.

A mighty fist clubbed him behind the ear. The arm around his neck was still tight, and he could tell from the size of it and the breadth of chest behind him that the man was big and powerful.

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Murdock went limp, purposely, turning a little more as the arm sought a new grip, then hooked viciously with his elbow.

The man grunted and hit him again. The sidewalk tilted, and after that things were a little vague for Murdock. He remembered the series of "muggings" that had occurred during the past week. He heard a hoarse whisper that said, "How do you like it, chump?" and then he was down, a kick in the ribs knocking his breath out before he could roll clear.

"Get up and we'll do it again," the voice said, and hands reached for him. Then Murdock was up, swinging blindly, furiously, but without much strength.

Not that he was any weakling. As the Number One photographer for the *Times-Clarion*, and later as picture chief, he had learned how to handle himself, and he seldom worried about the odds; in this case, however, he'd had no chance to defend himself. Now, already groggy, he went down again under a new blow, but this time the expected kick did not materialize. Somehow, there was light in the street and the man was running.

Murdock got his head up. He heard a car in back of him. A second car swung in from Commonwealth, its headlights sweeping wide, and it was this new brilliance that enabled him to get a fleeting glimpse of his assailant.

He was at the corner now, running hard, yet turning for a last look. Murdock saw only the profile and the size of him, and his head was clear enough now to photograph mentally the underslung jaw and the sharp depression where the bridge of his nose should have been.

Then the fellow was gone, and the cars had stopped and a taxi driver and his fare were running across the street.

They asked him what had happened and was he all right, and then someone spoke his name and he turned, recognizing the tall, spare man who had come from the coupé behind him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Thatcher," he said. "You were just in time."

"A little late, I'm afraid," Thatcher said.

"Yeah," said the taxi driver and spoke profanely of muggers in general and this one in particular. "A minute earlier and we might have nailed the guy. Sure you're all right, Mac? We could drop you at a doctor's."

"I'll take him, driver," Thatcher said. "He's a friend of mine." He had Murdock by the arm now, turning him toward the coupé, asking him whether he wanted to see a doctor first or go to police headquarters.

Bennett Thatcher was one of the city's finest criminal lawyers. As such, Murdock had photographed him often, and because he still felt a little rocky, he was grateful now for the older man's help.

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"I don't need a doctor," he said. "I'd rather raise a row at headquarters."

Bennett Thatcher drove around the block and back along Berkeley Street. "You seem to be getting more than your share of trouble," he said. "I read that paragraph in the *Bulletin* about the business with Lloyd Farnsworth at the Club Flamingo. Last night you had to battle him, and now tonight a thug jumps you."

"It wasn't much of a battle. With Farnsworth, I mean." Murdock had been kidded about the incident several times during the day. "Farnsworth was a little drunk," he said. "He resented my being with his wife."

"A two-punch affair, the *Bulletin* said. Farnsworth missed, and you didn't." Thatcher stopped for a traffic light. "Did this fellow tonight rob you?"

Murdock said no, and now he was thinking of the sequence of action and what the thug had said, and it was then, though he did not realize it at the time, that the first seed of suspicion took root in his consciousness and began slowly to sprout . . .

Lieutenant Bacon had set his feet on his desk and a long black stogie in his mouth when Murdock stepped into the little office on the fourth floor of police headquarters, after having tried in vain to locate a certain captain to whom his complaint should have properly been made.

Bacon, a graying, stiff-backed veteran, glanced up casually, and quickly narrowed his gaze. He swung his feet down and removed the stogie. "Now what?" he said.

Murdock sat down and spoke morosely, "I came in to check on a rumor that's going around that you fellows are collecting the taxpayers' money to protect the public from muggers."

"Not me," said Bacon. "I'm strictly homicide." Then, seeing the slight bruise on the photographer's cheekbone and the resentment in his eyes, he asked, "Who got mugged?"

"Me," said Murdock and told him where and when.

"What did you lose?"

"Nothing."

"Those cars scared him off in time, huh?" Murdock thought it over, and now the suspicion in his mind began to blossom. He heard again the hoarse whisper, "How do you like it, chump? . . . Get up and we'll do it again," and he knew now that these were funny words for a mugger to say.

Furthermore, a man intent on robbery could have knocked him out easily from behind, taken his wallet, and been away in half the time the thug had used. "What?" he said, aware that Bacon had spoken.

"I said if you got any kind of look at him we could go into the Bureau of Records and you could look at pictures."

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"Some other time." Murdock stood up, "I've changed my mind. I don't think I was mugged."

"Huh?"

"I think that guy was hired to work me over."

"Yeah? Who by?"

"Lloyd Farnsworth."

Bacon straightened in his chair, his gaze troubled. "Wait a minute. You mean on account of that business at the Flamingo last night? I heard about it but—"

Murdock was no longer listening. For his doubt had become a half certainty. He was sitting again with Rhoda Farnsworth at the Flamingo, seeing Lloyd lurch toward their table, while a pretty, dark-haired girl tried to hold him back. Big, blond, handsome in a soft, decadent way, Lloyd Farnsworth spoke insultingly, and as Murdock rose, he swung hard, missed, and tried to slap his wife. Then Murdock hit him.

Now, remembering it all, recalling the threats and imprecations Farnsworth had mouthed as the waiters hurried him from the room, he found his hunch a sound one. Anger expanded inside him.

Lieutenant Bacon stood up, studying the photographer's stormy dark eyes and the hard, clean line of his jaw, and not liking what he saw. He had known Murdock a long time, had worked with him often and respected him greatly, not only for his honesty and ability as a press-photographer, but for his intelligence and sense of humor.

Murdock was intimidated by no one; he could speak the language of cops and bookies and circulation hustlers, and still be understood by dowagers in drawing rooms. Yet he seldom looked for trouble, and that's what bothered Bacon now. He had never seen Murdock in such a state of suppressed fury and he said so.

"Don't blow your top," he said. "So maybe Farnsworth did hire the guy. Go looking for him now, feeling like you do, and you'll get yourself in a jam."

"If I do I can handle it."

"Maybe—if you wait until tomorrow. Then, if you still feel like it, go ahead and poke him in the nose. Being strictly a rat, he'll probably charge you with assault, and the judge'll slap a fine on you and you'll wish you'd let it ride. But if that's the way you want it—" The Lieutenant put a hand on Murdock's arm. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

"I can walk."

Bacon hesitated, his eyes wise. "Okay. Walk. Maybe that'll cool you off. Maybe, between here and your place, you'll start to think again. If you do, remember what I said. Don't go looking for Lloyd Farnsworth tonight."

Kent Murdock remembered the words as he walked cross-town, striding hard, eyes up but unaware of his surroundings. By the time he had crossed Boylston he had begun to think again, and when he turned

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into the entrance of the small apartment house his boiling rage had been reduced to the simmering stage and common sense was exerting its steadying hand.

It was still impossible to think of Lloyd Farnsworth without rancor, and his bitterness had deeper roots than the affair at the Flamingo and the beating he had received tonight. It was a resentment of long standing, based on the suffering and humiliation Farnsworth had inflicted on his wife; and only now could Murdock appreciate the soundness of Bacon's advice that his desire to strike back be postponed until another time.

He was crossing the little foyer with this in mind when the woman rose from the settee by the elevator and came to meet him, tall and blonde and bareheaded, her mink coat covering a simple woolen dress.

"I phoned your office," Rhoda Farnsworth said. "They told me you'd left, so I thought I'd wait."

He took her hands in his, surprised that she should come here like this. He regarded her anxiously. "Has he been bothering you again?"

"No, Kent. I haven't seen him since last night."

"Something is. Bothering you, I mean. Come on."

Upstairs he made no further reference to the reason for her visit, but offered a drink, and when she refused, made one for himself. He excused himself and washed up, seeing now that there was no mark on his face except the small, faint bruise on one cheek.

When he had finished he sat down opposite her and said, "Now."

"It isn't anything," she said. "I'm going away for a while. I wanted to say goodbye."

She rose, leaving her coat on the sofa, and paced across the room, a gracefully slender woman, with gray eyes, a wide, mobile mouth, and honey-colored hair drawn tight back at the sides and worn in a low bun. When she stopped to stare out the window, his mind went back and he remembered how it had been in the beginning. She had been nineteen at the time, a gay, vital girl, spoiled, but good inside and genuine.

They had talked of love and marriage then, and it had been Murdock who hesitated. For she had money of her own, and he had been a sixty-a-week press photographer; he had been afraid of what might happen. But they were young and there were no lasting scars, and even with the beaux that followed they had remained friends.

She had been away when he was discharged from the Army. She had come back six months ago and called him, and because the thing that had once been between them had been fine and honest, the basis of their companionship was sound. They had lunch now and then, or cocktails, or occasionally a dinner. And they talked. That was all.

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Neither, it seemed, wanted nor expected more.

It had been that way when Lloyd Farnsworth came back from Mexico City, three months later. He had his apartment and Rhoda had hers, but they remained legally married, and it was his nature to see that she did not forget this. Murdock had seen the bruises on her wrists and arms, and knew there must be other bruises that did not show.

When he asked why she did not get a divorce, she gave him an answer he had to accept, though he felt sure there must be another reason she would not discuss . . .

"You don't have to leave," Murdock said.

"You don't know him. After last night he won't rest until he gets even."

"I'll take care of that." Murdock went on to tell what had happened during the past hour, seeing her gray eyes widen with disbelief and then with fear.

"Yes," she breathed. "It would be like Lloyd to do a thing like that."

"Physical punishment is a thing he understands." Murdock hesitated, his anger starting to build again. "He's been handing it out quite a while. A dose of the same medicine properly applied might cure him," he said.

The telephone rang, and he picked it up. "Yes," he said, and then stiffened as the familiar voice came to him.

"Hear you had a little trouble tonight," Lloyd Farnsworth said.

Murdock had difficulty talking. The taunting phrase smashed his defenses, and all the bitterness and resentment came surging back. He started to speak, and found he had to swallow first. He said, "Where are you?"

Farnsworth's reply was measured and distinct. "If you want to settle things, come on up."

"I'll be there," Murdock said.

Kent hung up, shaking a little with this new anger he no longer tried to control, the things in his mind written clearly in his hot, dark eyes and the tight lines of his face.

Rhoda Farnsworth saw it all and guessed the answer. She gave a little cry when he confirmed her fears; she pleaded with him, her voice distressed. "No, Kent! Please! I've caused you enough trouble."

Murdock got his coat and hat, and she kept pace with him. "You don't know him," she said. "You don't know how strong he is. Last night he was drunk."

"You mean he's bigger than I am." Murdock held her coat, his smile grim. "Come on, baby. And stop worrying. This is no trouble; this will be a pleasure."

He got her out of the apartment, closing his mind to the things she said, and on the sidewalk she knew further talk was useless and was quiet as he handed her into her car.

He waited until she drove off, and

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then walked quickly to Beacon Street, looking for a taxi. There was some traffic here, a few cabs, but none that were empty. He kept walking, his rage riding him.

He forgot about the taxi until he started to cross Massachusetts Avenue, and then, aware that he had but three blocks farther to go, decided to do without one. As a result, it took him a good twenty-five minutes to reach the block-long street where Lloyd Farnsworth lived on the top floor of a remodeled three-story brick house.

It was quiet here at the moment, and dark. The little park across the way was deserted. There were a few cars parked in front of the apartments on the east side of the street, but on the park side there was only one, a heavy coupé with a three-digit license number which Murdock noted absently and from long habit, since low numbers often signified owners of some importance.

He noticed, too, that the coupé was empty, and then he turned into Farnsworth's house. He found the lower door unlocked, and climbed swiftly to the top floor.

He knocked loudly on the heavy wooden door. When a muffled voice called from within, he opened the door. He stepped into the entrance hall and saw the lighted room beyond. He took one step, and then, without warning, the lights went out.

Before he could turn, before he could close the door or duck away from the certain peril he now knew was close, something slammed down on his head, and he felt himself falling as the pain exploded inside him . . .

When Kent Murdock opened his eyes he was flat on his back and the room lights were on. It did not mean anything to him, then; nothing meant anything but the ache in his head and the nausea at the pit of his stomach.

He tried to look about, but his neck hurt when he twisted it; so he rolled slowly over and got his knees under him, pushing and turning until he could sit up. His hat was off and he explored his head, finding that the source of pain was a lump over one ear. His face hurt, too, and he wondered about that.

He wanted to lie down again, but he didn't. He moved his hand to brace himself, and it touched metal. When he glanced down he found the object, a heavy brass candlestick he had never seen before. As he stared at it, seeing now the dark stain on the top edge, he remembered how the lights had gone out as he stood in the hall.

But the lights were on again and he was no longer in the hall. He was in an enormous living room, with portraits on the walls and two life-size nudes, one a dark-haired woman sitting at a dressing table, and the other a full-length profile of a girl with a mirror in her hand.

Then, as he began to think again,

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he glanced back at the brass candlestick, a growing sense of horror pressing in on him.

He got quickly to his feet. That was when he saw Lloyd Farnsworth.

In life a big, well-built man with wavy blond hair and a smooth, tanned skin, he now lay in front of a kneehole desk, face down, one arm crumpled under him. Even from where he stood, Murdock could see the matted darkness of the blond hair, the dark red spots on the rug. And it was then that the answer came to him.

For Murdock had seen and photographed too many dead men to be in any doubt about Farnsworth. In that same instant that he caught his breath and fought against the shock of his discovery, he understood the meaning of the red-tarnished candlestick, and knew with intuitive certainty that his own fingerprints would be on it.

Other things came to him with discouraging finality. He touched his face and found new marks there to explain the soreness he had felt. He looked at his right hand and saw the skinned knuckles. Then he moved quickly to Farnsworth and, kneeling down, found other marks on the man's cheekbone.

The scene was so circumstantially perfect that there was one terrifying moment when he wondered if perhaps he had not done this thing and forgotten it, like fighters he had heard of who, out on their feet, kept punching on instinct alone until consciousness finally returned.

He shook off the thought with an effort and walked quickly through the apartment. In the bathroom he examined his face and saw the cut chin and the new lump on his jaw. He went into the bedroom, not looking for anything, but moving dazedly as he waited for the shock to pass.

A leather-framed portrait of a smiling, dark-haired girl stood on the bureau. Across it was scrawled *All my love, Nancy*, and he knew this was the girl who had been with Farnsworth the night before.

He went back into the living room, trying to think reasonably, wondering what he should do. When he found himself staring again at the candlestick he bent down and polished it clean with his handkerchief, all but the darkened edge.

Yet, even as he put it back, he knew this was not enough. If the killer was as smart as he seemed, there would be other prints on other objects in the room—prints that would match exactly Murdock's own. And now, standing there with his thoughts bogged down in hopelessness and dismay, he remembered his talk with Lieutenant Bacon.

Bacon would recall each detail, once the murder was discovered, and he would amplify and embellish these details with supposition and suspicion. Bacon was his friend, yet Bacon would have no choice but to arrest him, under the circumstances. Therefore, the thing to do

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was to get out while he could, give himself a chance to think, and make his plans.

This much was clear, and still he did not go. Perhaps it was because he was tired, beaten, and discouraged. Whatever the reason, he dropped down on the desk chair. That was how he happened to see the torn pieces of paper on the floor.

He went to one knee, knowing what they were now, not picking them up but nudging the bits in place, like a puzzle, until he had pieced together two Pullman tickets to Miami, Florida, and a reservation for a stateroom. After staring at them a moment, he scrambled the pieces with his hand and dropped back on the chair. Then, for want of something better to do, he began absently to open the desk drawers.

He saw at once that those at the sides were in order, and he did not disturb the contents. He might have gone away then had he not found the center drawer locked. It challenged him, and hardly aware of what he did, he went to Farnsworth, slid one hand into a trouser pocket until he found a ring of keys.

He straightened, and began moving to the desk as he examined them; then, unaccountably, he stopped. He found himself listening.

In spite of himself, he turned and looked about the room, as though half expecting to find someone lurking in the shadowed corners. The next moment he heard the sound that warned him of danger: the strident whine of tires as a speeding automobile rounded a nearby corner. With it came the throb of the motor, rising briefly, then falling away as the power was cut and the car drew closer.

He was at the window overlooking the street when the small sedan swerved in front of the building and rocked to a stop. He saw the three men jump out below him, one of them in uniform. When they crossed the sidewalk, Murdock wheeled from the window and ran down the hall toward the kitchen.

At the far side of this was a door. He tried it, handkerchief in hand, found it unlocked, opened it, and went out fast, feeling his way down the black stair well. A minute later he was in a narrow alley, its open end silhouetted against the night sky.

Groping his way along, he reached the corner without difficulty. He crossed to the little park, moved thirty feet inside its line of trees, and keeping in the deep shadows, he started back. The police car, he saw, was empty. He glanced up and could see no movement behind the Venetian blinds of Farnsworth's front room.

Then, about to back away, he noticed that the heavy coupé with its low license number was no longer there; instead, a dark sedan was parked diagonally across from the house, and the man behind the wheel seemed intent on it and the police car.

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Murdock picked out a tree near the curbing, and stood behind it. The man in the sedan seemed vaguely familiar. As Murdock watched, the dashlight flicked on and the motor started.

Murdock recognized the driver, then. Dr. John Carlton. What made it important was that Carlton, like Murdock, had once been in love with Rhoda Farnsworth . . .

Jack Fenner had an apartment off Hemenway Street, within easy walking distance of Lloyd Farnsworth's place. Murdock thought of it almost at once, not only because it was close, but because Fenner, besides being a friend of long standing, was probably the best private detective in the city.

Luckily, Fenner was in. He was a medium-sized man with a look of sinewy toughness about him and a sharply chiseled face. His quick agate eyes took one look at Murdock's face and expression, and he suppressed the wisecrack he would have normally made.

"You know where the bathroom is," he said. "Clean up. I'll make a drink." He locked the door and went off to the kitchen. When he had the drinks he came into the bathroom and nodded his approval. "You look better already," he said. "Here."

Murdock took the drink, swallowed gratefully while Fenner administered to the cut chin and skinned knuckles. When he had finished, they went into the living room and Fenner made another drink for his guest. Murdock told his story from the beginning, while Fenner slumped in his chair and listened.

"You were smart to come here," he said when Murdock finished.

"I wanted to talk to you before I went home."

"You're not going home," Fenner said. "After what you told Bacon, he's probably got a man there waiting for you now. He's got to arrest you. If I was a dick I'd have to arrest you. And murder is not a bailable offense in this city."

Murdock sighed. He said, "They'll get me, anyway. And when they do, if they find out you put me up, they'll make you an accessory."

"Probably."

"You'll lose your license. And then what'll you do?"

Fenner opened his eyes and grinned. "If we try hard and get to be model prisoners," he said dryly, "they might let us play gin rummy a couple of nights a week." He stood up, his manner abrupt. "Come on, snap out of it! You've cracked jobs like this before. Let's see what we've got."

Fenner started pacing, and Murdock watched him. It made him feel good, knowing how Fenner felt, hearing him talk.

"Farnsworth hired a thug to beat you up," the detective said. "He did it in such a way that you'd

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probably tumble to what was behind it. You did tumble. You told Bacon. Then Farnsworth got scared you weren't coming up so he could beat the tar out of you, so he phoned and dared you to come. The trouble was, somebody must have been with him when he made that call, and your luck was bad. Probably this guy had been wanting to kill Farnsworth for a long time, and all of a sudden he knows this is the perfect setup. He beats Farnsworth's skull in, lays for you, marks you up, and frames it neat; then he goes out and tips off the cops."

He paused, brow wrinkled. Either that, or the guy comes in just after Farnsworth made the call and Farnsworth tells him what's cooking—and the guy jumps him. How long did it take you to get there? . . . Twenty-five minutes would have given the killer plenty of time. Now, who'd want to kill him?"

Fenner glanced up, as though just realizing what he'd said. He shrugged and grunted disparagingly.

"That's a silly question," he said. "There must be a dozen guys who would've liked to kill him. Dames, too. He painted enough of them—with and without their clothes. There was something wrong with him, something morbid. He was nuts."

"He was a pretty fair painter."

"Yeah. I understand he could get fifteen hundred a throw."

"He got the women, too," Murdock said, his thoughts sliding off on a tangent.

"Sure. He was big and blond and handsome, and he had the kind of smile that promised women whatever they wanted. I don't know how else you can explain it. They knew the reputation he had, but they kept coming, letting him do portraits of them, figuring this time it would be different."

He glanced up, one lid half shut. "His wife is an old friend of yours, huh? He didn't care anything about her, did he? Then why didn't she divorce him?"

"She had a lot of pride," Murdock said. "She was young, then, and spoiled by too much money and not enough responsibility. Everyone advised her against the marriage, but she went ahead, and afterward, when it blew up, she didn't want to admit it."

"To stick it out as long as she did there must've been another reason."

"I think you're right," Murdock said. "But she says no."

Fenner yawned and got up. "Let's go to bed. Let's sleep on it, and tomorrow I'll nose around and see what the score is."

In the morning Jack Fenner went out for newspapers while Murdock put breakfast on the table. When the detective returned, he pointed to a half-column story in the *Times-Clarion*.

Murdock scanned it but found

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no mention of his name. Police, summoned by an anonymous tip, said the paper, had gone to Lloyd Farnsworth's apartment shortly before midnight and found him dead of a fractured skull . . . Several clues had been uncovered . . . Pending an arrest, the veil of official silence had been drawn about the case. That was all.

"I'll be in the bulldog edition of the afternoon sheets," Murdock said morosely. "I wonder what they'll use for a picture, if any."

"Cut it out!" Fenner said. "Eat!"

Murdock obeyed and found he was hungry. He felt better when he had finished, and went directly to the telephone. He dialed the *Times-Clarion* and asked for T. A. Wyman, the Managing Editor.

Wyman's reaction to the call was characteristic. "Are you all right?" he asked first. Then, having satisfied himself on this point, he said, "Are you crazy?"

He wanted to know where Murdock was, and what he thought he was doing by hiding out, and why he didn't come down and thrash things out properly.

Murdock said he had an idea the police were looking for him; that was why he couldn't come in yet. He said he had some things to do first, and once the police caught him they'd probably hold him without bail.

"Not for long, they won't," Wyman said. "You want to bet? . . . I talked to Bennett Thatcher," he said. "He's agreed to handle the case."

Murdock took a breath and felt immeasurably better. Not just because Wyman had hired the best lawyer in town for him, but because Wyman assumed his innocence, unquestioningly.

"All right," he said. "I'll see him. But not downtown. I don't want to get picked up."

"I'll call him," Wyman said. "I'll tell Thatcher to wait for you at his home, and that you'll be there in an hour. Okay?"

Jack Fenner nodded approval when Murdock relayed the information. "If you've got Thatcher you're halfway off the hook already." He rummaged around in the closet and brought out a trench coat and a gray felt hat. "You wore a brown hat and a brown topcoat. Today you wear a gray hat and a trench coat—and these."

He produced a pair of tinted, shell-rimmed glasses, not dark enough to be conspicuous, but with off-white lenses.

"Don't flag any taxis," he added. "You know too many drivers. Get your cabs at the stands after you've looked over the hackies. Come back here and wait for me after you've finished with Thatcher."

"And what'll you be doing?"

"The best I can."

Murdock watched Fenner move toward the door, and then stopped him. He remembered John Carlton and his sedan the night before and

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his interest in Farnsworth's place. He remembered the heavy coupé that had been parked outside when he went in, and had been gone when he came out. He gave the detective the three-digit number, and asked him to check it, and told him why.

Fenner was interested. "Will do," he said. "That's a good place to start."

Bennett Thatcher lived with two servants in a brick-and-frame Tudor house in the suburbs, and when Murdock rang, Thatcher himself opened the door and led the way across the paneled hall and into the high-ceilinged drawing room. Here Murdock stopped to gaze at the portrait over the mantel, which showed a slim, golden-haired woman in a simple evening gown, a woman of perhaps twenty-eight, delicately made, with a gentle mouth and smiling eyes.

He remembered her now, and the wedding, some six years back, of the successful middle-aged lawyer and this girl not long out of college. Murdock had been in the Army at the time of her death, but he had since heard that it had happened as the result of an accidental overdose of sleeping tablets, and he knew that because of this, Thatcher had taken the lead in advocating state legislation to restrict the sale of barbiturates. Yet it was not these things that held Murdock now, but rather the beauty of the portrait.

Thatcher, following his glance, looked at the picture, too. Thatcher was a neat, well-groomed man with a lean, fit look about him not often seen in men of fifty. A shrewd, implacable adversary in a courtroom, he had a crisp, direct way of talking that fitted perfectly his naturally stern countenance and steady, penetrating gaze. Yet now, looking up at the portrait, there was little of the lawyer about him and no sternness at all in his eyes.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" he said. He hesitated, continued presently, his tone quiet. "She gave it to me for my birthday two years ago, as a surprise. I lost her only two months later, and but for this I would have nothing left but memories . . . She was the only woman I ever loved," he added simply, and then, as though reluctant to display his emotions further, he motioned toward the adjoining study.

"Let's go in here," he said, "and talk about you . . . Did you kill him?" he asked when they were seated.

Murdock's eyes darkened and his voice was as blunt as Thatcher's. "What do you think?"

The lawyer shrugged. "It's a question I always ask. It doesn't make much difference, but I like to know. Suppose you start from the time you entered police headquarters last night. And I want all the details, understand?"

Murdock told the same story he had related to Jack Fenner, and

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Thatcher, sitting in his desk chair and staring out the window, came up with much the same reaction.

"It seems obvious enough," he said. "Whoever knew of Farnsworth's phone call to you killed him, then bruised his face and yours to make this hypothetical fight look authentic." He stuck his bony jaw out, massaged it briefly.

"That makes it bad," he said. "You've got a lot of friends around town; the police know you. If Farnsworth was shot to death it would look better, because the police know you're not the sort to go out with a gun to settle a personal grudge. But from things I've heard about you, you might use your fists. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what you started out to do . . . Maybe that's a break for us," he said presently. "Looking at it in the right way, it might work to your advantage."

Murdock grunted softly. "I'm glad something works to my advantage."

"What I mean is, with the physical facts as they are, you could never be convicted of first-degree murder. You went there without a weapon and premeditation could not be proved."

Murdock had a sarcastic answer for that, too, but he kept it to himself.

"I think we could make a deal right now for a manslaughter charge," the lawyer said. "In court I might even get an acquittal on self-defense."

"It's not enough," Murdock cut in. "I'm not interested in an acquittal. If I stand trial, acquitted or not, a lot of people are going to remember. Always I'll be the guy who murdered Lloyd Farnsworth, and I say that's no good. I didn't kill him, and I don't want to stand trial on any charge."

Thatcher's brows came up. "What do you suggest?"

"Ha!" Murdock's laugh was abrupt and unpleasant. "I suggest I go out and find out who *did* kill him."

Thatcher smiled briefly to show he appreciated the sardonic humor of the remark. "That would be the ideal solution, of course, but—" He paused, his fingers drumming the desk top. "What you want is time—right?"

"I want to stay out of jail. I'll surrender on any charge, provided I can get bail."

"All right." Thatcher sat up, his tone brisk. "That makes sense. The police don't know yet that I'm acting for you. I understand they have certain evidence that points conclusively to your guilt, according to them. I'll find out about it. I'll see the District Attorney and throw my weight around. With your record and the *Times-Clarion* behind you I think we'll make out all right."

He stood up and shook hands. "Call me tonight. And don't worry about it. Also"—he hesitated, smiled again—"try not to get yourself

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caught until I know where we stand."

When Jack Fenner came back to the apartment shortly after six that evening he brought a newspaper that said the police were looking for Kent Murdock; also some news of his own.

"That coupé you saw last night with the three-figure number belongs to Rudy Yates," he said.

"The gangster?"

"Ex-gangster," Fenner said. "And what do you think? Rudy came to see me this afternoon." He took out a hundred-dollar bill and spread it on the kitchen table. "Retainer."

Murdock peered at him, dark eyes puzzled. "Why?" he asked. "Why should Rudy come to you?"

"On account of my reputation and great ability. Also," Fenner said, "I think he was playing the odds. He knows you're in hiding, and he knows I'm a friend of yours. He wants to see you."

"About what?"

"He didn't say." Fenner folded the bill and pocketed it lovingly. "I sort of made a tentative date for you. At the Club 66."

Murdock greeted the remark with a grunt of derision. "Oh, fine," he said, recalling the club's central location, popularity, and reputation for decorous dancing and good food. "I just walk in and ask for Rudy and wait for the police."

"No," said Fenner. "You go down the alley beside it, coming in from the street behind, and you sneak up to a certain door that I will tell you about, and walk in."

"It'll be all unlocked for me, of course."

"Of course. Because I'll go in first and unlock it." Fenner grinned. "Then you cross the hall to the first door on the left and open it, and that is Rudy's office. He don't know when you're coming, or if you're coming at all, so it ought to be a surprise."

Murdock thought it over and liked the idea.

"Yes," he said. "I can ask Rudy about his coupé. He might even know something about those torn Pullman tickets I found."

Judging by the procession of taxis that stopped to discharge passengers, business at Club 66 was good at 9:40 that night. Out front, the street lamps and a fancy marquee made the entrance a well-lighted and inviting spot; but forty feet back from the sidewalk the alley was dark and windy, and Murdock had to grope his way to find the proper door.

It was unlocked, as Jack Fenner had promised, and with a quick backward glance to make sure he was alone, Murdock stepped into a narrow, dimly lighted hall and crossed diagonally to another door marked: PRIVATE. He moved in without knocking.

It was a squarish room with another door on the left, no windows,

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nodern furniture, and indirect lighting. Opposite the hall door was a white, flat-topped desk and behind t sat a black-eyed man of forty or o, with a pink, freshly massaged ace that looked more muscular han soft, and sleek black hair. n that first instant as he glanced ıp, the mouth was hard, the eyes ınnoyed; then, as he leaned back, the lips relaxed.

"Hello," Rudy Yates said. "I've been looking for you, Murdock. Sit down."

Murdock turned down his coat collar and leaned back against the door, surveying Yates's stocky, dinner-jacketed figure, the carnation in his buttonhole. He took his time saying hello, and remembered many things.

Rudy Yates had started young, ınd until recently his business had been rackets, any kind of racket promising generous profits. He had done exceedingly well. He had sufficient resources to enter heavily into early-war black-market activities in tires and nylons and second-hand cars, and though he had been indicted for his activities in such used cars, the case had not come to trial.

More lately he had worn a more legitimate mantle. His Club 66 was a model of propriety, catering neither to gangsters, hepcats, nor swing music. He had extensive real-estate holdings, with offices downtown. He dressed expensively and spoke, not out of the side of his mouth, but with suave politeness.

Murdock thought of all these things as he stood there, but his eyes were no longer on Rudy Yates; they were fastened on the photograph of a dark-haired, vivacious-looking girl which stood on the bookcase. It was the same girl who had signed her name *Nancy* on the photograph he had seen last night in Farnsworth's bedroom.

"I heard you did a job on Lloyd Farnsworth last night," Yates said.

"You ought to know," Murdock said. "You were there." He watched something flicker in Yates's narrowed eyes and said, "What did you want to see me about?"

Rudy Yates selected a cigar from a silver humidor, offered it to Murdock, then closed the lid when his offer was refused. He carefully removed one end with a gold cutter, then gestured toward the photograph before inserting the cigar in his mouth.

"I've got a kid sister," he said. "She doesn't like me much right now. She's been chasing around with Farnsworth."

"She was with him the other night at the Flamingo."

"She moved out of my place a month ago." Yates shrugged. "She's twenty-one, and I couldn't stop her. She has a little flat, and a job as a model. She has a swell boy from a nice family—name of Wordell—in love with her, but she won't give him a tumble since she's been going with Farnsworth."

He removed the cigar, examined

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it. "She thinks I killed him last night. She's making trouble for me."

"Why?"

"I suppose it's because I told her I would have Farnsworth's pretty face spoiled if she kept on seeing him."

"So?"

"So I have to convice her I didn't do it."

Murdock reached for a cigarette, his smile humorless. "That'll be a little tough to do, won't it? You were there last night and"—he hesitated, remembering the torn Pullman tickets, and decided to take a shot in the dark—"you knew she was about ready to run off to Florida with Farnsworth."

Murdock did not get the reaction he expected; he got no reaction at all. Nothing changed in the broad, pink face. Yates dropped his hand behind the desk, and Murdock thought it might come up with a gun. Instead of that, Yates produced a lighter and spoke between puffs.

"She thinks I did it," he said, as though there had been no interruption, "and I think you did. So do the police, and that I like." He turned as the door in the side wall opened, and said, "Come in, boys."

The two men who entered, apparently in response to a buzzer Yates had pressed when he reached for the lighter, took two forward steps and stopped. One was about Murdock's height and weight, but younger, with curly brown hair and a pug nose; the other was older, heavier, and partly bald. Both watched the press photographer coldly and without interest.

"The more the police figure you," Yates continued calmly, "the more it takes the pressure off me. With my sister. And the longer you stay lost, the better I'll like it."

Murdock got it, then. He was not yet sure that Yates had killed Farnsworth, but he knew how his own disappearance would look to the police and Bennett Thatcher and the newspapers. A half hour ago he had been avoiding the authorities; now he wished he hadn't. He said, "Not even you could square a kidnaping charge, Yates."

"Kidnaping? I think not. You came here of your own accord. I have a pleasant room upstairs that you'll find quite comfortable."

"No, thanks," Murdock said, and reached behind him for the doorknob.

Yates, not stirring in his chair, said, "Take him, boys."

They were moving as Yates spoke, the big man first.

"Let's be nice, bub," he said, and then his hand lunged forward.

Murdock said nothing. He knew it would do no good, but he was too angry to care. He stepped inside the big hand and, moving forward, hooked hard with his right and followed through.

The fellow grunted and went backward, fighting to keep his balance. His legs caught the edge of

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a chair, and he sat down. But he came up fast, his face ugly, and as Murdock reached again for the door the curly-headed youth started to pull a gun. Then the door Murdock was reaching for banged open, knocking him aside.

Jack Fenner came in fast. He had one hand in his coat pocket, and his agate eyes took in the room in a glance. Rudy Yates was still in his chair. The big man had stopped his rush, and the gun in Curlyhead's hand was still half in his pocket.

Fenner said, "Hold it, Curly!" and smiled. He did not take his hand out of his pocket. He did not have to.

Rudy Yates sat motionless in his chair, and for the first time he looked worried. The big man still glared. Curly looked defiant, but he didn't move his hand. He spoke to Yates.

"I think we could take the two of 'em," he said.

A muscle tightened in Rudy's jaw and was still. He leaned back. He spread his hands and started to smile. "I think not . . . Shut up!" he said when Curly started to bluster. "You don't know how lucky you are. All right, Jack," he said. "It's your move."

Fenner told Curly to drop his gun, and this time the youth pulled his hand out empty. Fenner removed his own hand and jerked his head at Murdock.

"Beat it," he said. "The way you came in. I'll stick around and keep Rudy company . . . See you later, chum," he said, and winked.

Nancy Yates had a small, walk-up apartment not far from Fenner's, a shabby, gray-brick structure with uncarpeted halls and the smell of dry rot and stale food in the stairwell. Murdock, arriving at 10:30, knocked at the door, which was opened on a chain lock while he was inspected by a pair of suspicious dark eyes.

"I'm Kent Murdock," he said. "I want to talk to you about Lloyd Farnsworth."

The lashes went wide. For a moment Murdock thought she was going to slam the door. Then she said, "Just a minute," and after a brief pause she reappeared and unfastened the chain.

He thanked her, hat in hand, and went inside, hearing the door close behind him. When he turned she was leaning against the panel, her face white and her mouth set. In her right hand she held a gun and it was pointed right at him.

"You killed him," she whispered.

Murdock stood still, holding his breath. He was eight feet from the gun. He knew he could not reach it in time, and he knew from the way she held it that she was not used to guns and that was what scared him most—the thought that it could easily go off before she realized it.

He quickly put on a grin and tried to speak calmly.

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"You're tougher than your brother," he said. "I've just been down to see him. I guess he's been telling you that I killed Farnsworth."

"The papers say so."

"And what're you going to do with the gun? Shoot me, or turn me over to the police?" He kept his grin constant, and when she did not reply he tossed his hat aside. "You know what Rudy told me? He told me you thought *he* did it, and I'm beginning to think he did. I know one thing—he was there last night."

Nancy Yates let the muzzle waver. She moistened her lips. "I don't believe you."

"His car was out front," Murdock said, and went on to tell about the torn tickets he had found. "I guess you were going away with Farnsworth."

"I—I was," the girl said.

"You must have loved him very much."

There was no answer to this except the tears that welled up in her eyes. She tried to blink them back and could not, and finally used the back of her hand. Murdock moved slowly toward her, offering his handkerchief.

"I don't want it," the girl said and turned her head. As she did so, Murdock reached down and gently took the gun from her hand.

When he had removed the bullets he put them and the gun on the table. She was watching him now. He produced cigarettes and handed her one. When he had given her a light he went to the couch and sat down as if it were a thing he had often done here.

She still stood at the door, a small, finely modeled girl in a skirt and blouse that made her look even younger than she was. Murdock began to talk.

"So you really think Farnsworth was in love with you," he said.

"He was."

He shook his head, smiling. "I suppose he told you he was going to marry you."

"Yes." She squared her shoulders, and her chin was set. "Next year. When he got a divorce from his wife."

"That's a long time. Why wait?"

"She was going to make a settlement. He said he'd waited this long and he might as well wait until she was thirty—that would be next year—when she got her money. Then she could pay him."

He sighed for her benefit, registering what he hoped would seem like mild amazement. "I'm a little surprised at you," he said. "You're a modern girl and you've been around a little and had a good education. You must have known about the other times and the other women who came before you. Just because he wanted to go away with you for a while is no sign that—"

"Oh!" She was outraged and furious. "You don't believe me?" she said. "Well, I'll show you."

And with that she hurried to a

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secretary, opened the bottom drawer, and took out a flat, green metal box measuring about nine by twelve inches.

"There," she said, eyes snapping as she thrust it toward him. "I guess that will prove he loved me. He wanted me to keep it for him, because he trusted me and . . ."

Murdock did not hear the rest of it. He was examining the box and the lock, remembering now the keys he had taken from Farnsworth. He asked what was in it. Nancy said she didn't know, she had no key.

"Maybe I have," Murdock said. He produced Farnsworth's, spreading them wide in his palm. One of them worked. He lifted the lid, and the girl dropped on the couch beside him, her head close to his as he began to remove the contents.

There were a half dozen bonds, some stock certificates. There was a red-leather notebook filled with names, dates, prices, and titles, to indicate the paintings Farnsworth had sold and to whom. There was a legal-size envelop sealed with wax. On the face of it was the name: *Rudolph Yates.*

Murdock's interest quickened. "What's in that?" he demanded.

"Papers." Nancy Yates glanced away.

"What kind of papers?"

"Well, you know—affidavits, I guess you call them. About some used-car business Rudy was once in."

Murdock remembered the indictment against Rudy Yates, the case that never came to trial. "You mean if the District Attorney had these Rudy might go to jail? How did they get here?"

The girl flushed. She bowed her head, and now her voice was barely audible. "I—I stole them," she said. "From Rudy's desk." Then, having made the admission, she raised her head, and the words rushed out. "I had to," she said. "Rudy said he'd take care of Lloyd if I didn't stop seeing him. He said he'd fix his face so no woman would ever look at him. Don't you see I—?"

"Yes," Murdock said grimly. "Rudy knew Lloyd had the envelope and what would happen if he bothered him. Only, last night, when Rudy came, the envelope wasn't there . . . All right," he said, "I guess that proves you loved him."

He did not add that the envelope might possibly make a second motive for murder, but reached for another envelope in the metal box.

This one was not sealed, and when he opened it he saw that it contained a photograph and a photostat. He looked at the photograph first, taking in its story in a glance, and then sat there, incredulous.

For the photograph showed a sidewalk scene, a hotel entrance and part of a marquee. Leaving the entrance, arm in arm, were Rhoda Farnsworth and Dr. John Carlton in his navy lieutenant's uniform. The photostat of a regis-

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tration card from a hotel in San Francisco completed the story; it was signed: *Lieut. & Mrs. John Carlton.*

Murdock calmly put the picture back in the envelope and stood up. "I'll take this," he said. "And the leather notebook." He put the other things back in the box and locked it up. "You keep this," he said. "No one knows about it but us."

At the door he shook hands with her and thanked her for her help.

"We're in it together," he said. "I want to find out who killed Lloyd Farnsworth. Do you?" He saw her nod, that odd expression still in her gaze. "You'd better think it over," he said, "because it might be your brother."

He opened the door. When he turned to close it she was still watching him, her mouth slack and fear in her eyes . . .

Jack Fenner put aside the mystery book he had been reading and listened carefully to Murdock's story. When he had it all, he stood up and grunted softly, his grin crooked.

"What a guy with the dames," he said.

Murdock, busy with the drink Fenner had furnished, made no comment, and the detective began to examine Farnsworth's red-leather notebook. Presently he looked up, to eye Murdock narrowly. "You know what I think this is?"

"It's a record of sales."

"It's more than that. Rumor hath it, as we big shots often say, that Farnsworth did a bit of blackmailing. Lord knows he had opportunity enough, considering all the dames that fell for him. And my guess is that he sold a lot of paintings that way." Fenner tapped the book.

"Some of these names are legitimate collectors; maybe some bought paintings because they liked them. I think a lot of women bought them because they had to, or else. But wherever Farnsworth listed more than one sale to the same person, maybe a little blackmail was the persuader. There are three people who bought two," he said, and read off the names, which meant nothing to Murdock. "One guy bought three: Dr. John Carlton."

Murdock sat up fast and held out his hand. "Let's see." He verified the statement, and Fenner continued, "You've got two good suspects in Yates and Carlton. Both were there last night and both had motives, and I guess of the two I like Carlton's best. He's got a good practice, a nice wife, a little boy, all of which would blow higher than a kite if Farnsworth got nasty. The trouble is there are probably other people who have just as good motives that we don't know about."

He sat down with his drink, his mood reminiscent, and Murdock listened.

"I've heard plenty of stories

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about him," the detective said. "I don't know how true they are, but at least one dame is supposed to have committed suicide on his account, and a couple of times he was run out of town by irate husbands. He did a lot of nude jobs, so they say. I understand he'd sometimes do a nude of a lady friend and paint a different face on it so he could exhibit it. Sometimes I guess he didn't always change the face. I guess a woman might buy a picture like that later on—just to destroy it, huh?"

Fenner expected no answer. He went on, "Gene Nye had a thing in his column a couple of years ago about a husband who'd found out about one of those nudes and came up from the country to kill Farnsworth. Only, he made the mistake of telling his wife, and she phoned Farnsworth, and before the husband could get there, Farnsworth had painted a dress on the figure. He got away with that one, but right after that some other guy chased him out of town. He went to Mexico City. Just got back a couple of months ago."

"He went to San Francisco, too," Murdock said.

Fenner lifted one brow. "Yeah, I guess he must have . . . Well, we still have to concentrate on Carlton and Yates. Have you heard from Thatcher?"

Murdock went to the telephone, called the lawyer, and spoke for three minutes. When he hung up he felt better. He could even smile a little. "Thatcher did all right," he said. "Tomorrow I get pinched."

"On what charge?"

"As a material witness—pending the meeting of the Grand Jury. Wyman's putting up the bail. Thatcher says it won't take more than an hour. I'm seeing him in the morning."

"Good enough," Fenner said. "Provided we crack this thing before the Grand Jury takes over. Where you going?"

Murdock had put on his hat and was reaching for his coat. "I'm going to see Rhoda."

"Now? It's almost twelve . . . Well, all right," Fenner said when Murdock belted the coat without replying. "There's just one comment I'd like to make: this Rhoda is an old friend of yours. I don't know how it used to be with you, but you can hardly expect to be objective when you're listening to her troubles."

"What about it?"

"I wondered if it ever occurred to you that a woman could have beaten Farnsworth to death—yes, and slugged you. Even a little woman—if she had a heavy candlestick to work with."

(*continued on page 144*)

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KILLER AT LARGE

by RICHARD O. LEWIS

THE KITCHEN DOOR BURST OPEN, and Millie Brutt flung herself into the room. She sloshed the milk bucket to the floor, slammed the door shut, and leaned back against its uneven boards, her flat chest rising and falling.

"He—he chased me!" she panted.

The kerosene lamp on the rough table near the center of the room cast a glow of pale yellow over her scantily clad figure and down her thin legs leaving her dirt-smudged bare feet in thick shadow.

Ma Brutt tossed the pants she had been mending onto the table and peered around the lamp at Millie. The glow from the light caught the thin patches of blonde hair that grew far down along the sides of her cheeks and made a misplaced halo of them.

"Who?" Ma asked.

"Honsey!" Millie said, brushing scanty hair away from her eyes with the back of a thin hand. "He got a-holt of me and . . ." Her pointed face was flushed, and her little eyes glowed as yellow as the lamplight.

"Did he . . .?" Ma was half out of her chair.

"No, Ma," said Millie. "I—I jerked loose and ran!"

Pa Brutt dropped a crushed nut into a battered pan on the table, laid his hammer on the up-ended hickory log between his knees, and turned halfway around in his chair The week-old beard on his moonlik face was a sad combination of gra and faded red. His bulbous nose cleft down the center, seemed to b two noses which had somehow be come glued together, side by side

"And I suppose you spilt th milk," he said.

Millie picked up the bucket an brought it to the table. "Not all o it, Pa," she said. "Jest *some* of it."

Pa got part way up from his cha to peer into the bucket. "Yeah," h said. "Jest *most* of it! And it too you long enough to get what yo did!"

"The cow chain is gone," sai Millie. "I couldn't tie 'em up. The kept walkin' around."

Ma looked around the other sid of the lamp at Pa. "Seems like yo shouldn't be worryin' so muc about the milk," she said, "an should get yore gun and go ou and hunt down that murderin Honsey 'fore he fixes Millie th way he fixed Sissie Simms!"

Pa eased himself back into hi chair. "Aw, she's jest puttin' on," he said, picking up his hamme again. "Girls sixteen years old ge funny notions. Allus thinkin' some one's chasin' 'em. Look at her." H poked the hammer in Millie's direc tion. "Ugly as a mud fence in rainstorm. Nobody'd want to chas

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her, let alone marry up with her. Even crazy Honsey ain't *that* crazy!"

Millie had stopped panting, but her face was still flushed, and her yellow eyes glowed almost catlike above the lamp as her gaze traveled from the bulbous nose of her father to the hairy face of her mother and back to the twin nose again. "Seems like, round here," she said, "beauty ain't much needed for marryin' up."

Pa's bearded mouth fell open. "Now you jest hold yore rattlin' tongue!" He smote the butt of the hickory log with the hammer for emphasis, and the head of the hammer went skittering across the floor. "Yore ma can't help it none iffen she ain't purty."

"Best you quit quarrelin' about who's purtiest and get yore gun and go have a look around," said Ma. "We don't want to find Millie out behind the barn some day, choked to death like Sissie was. And her clothes all tore . . ."

Pa tossed the headless hammer onto the table. "Maybe Honsey didn't kill Sissie," he said. "Maybe it was somebody else."

"It was him, all right, and you know it," Ma insisted. "His cap was found right 'side her poor body. Anyway, he's the only one round here'd do such a thing."

Pa raised his left foot up from the floor shadows and into the glow of the lamp. The foot was swathed in bulky bandages stripped from a feed sack. "You know I can't get round good since I got my foot stomped on. I can't go traipsin' all over creation—"

"Seems like a month is long enough to heal it," Ma said. "You didn't get it broke none—jest a mite skinned up."

"Got disfection or somethin' in it," Pa said. "Toes kin hardly wiggle."

"He's probably out there in the dark right now," said Millie. "Jest waitin'!"

"They'll ketch him in a night or two," Pa promised. "Almost got him couple of nights ago, I heared, in Beeshy's cornfield. But he pushed old Beeshy down and made a run fer it."

"Millie, fetch the lantern and light it," commanded Ma. "And, Pa, get yore gun and have a look!"

Millie brought the lantern to the table and lit a match. The untrimmed wick came to uncertain life with a feeble glow, and a thin horn of smoke arose along one side of it to add its blackness to the smudge already in the globe.

Pa hobbled dutifully to the wall beside the door, lifted the shotgun from its pegs, broke it open, and satisfied himself that there was a live shell in the breech.

Ma picked up the pants she had been mending and shoved them out to him. "Better put these on 'fore you go out," she suggested.

Pa looked down at his worn underwear and bandaged foot. "Tarnation, woman!" he grumbled. "Iffen I stop to put 'em on I'll have

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to take off all the bandage, then put it all back on again—jest as I had to do a while ago when you made me give you my pants so's you could fix 'em! Then when I come back I'll have to take all the bandage off again and take my pants off again and put all the bandage back on again jest to get to where I am now!"

Then a happier thought struck him, and he patted the gun in his hand. "Anyway," he said, "iffen I get a blast at that crazy Honsey, he won't mind much iffen my pants is on or not."

On the porch the light from the lantern in Millie's hand seemed to pull in the darkness rather than to dispel it, and nothing much could be seen outside its short yellow radius.

Pa stepped gingerly down to the hard ground and drew back the hammer of the gun. "Now jest where did he chase you at?" he asked.

"Right by the barn, Pa. Jest as I came out. He was waitin', and he grabbed me to him—"

"Must be crazier'n I thought he was," Pa mumbled.

Ma stood in the doorway and watched them go. But all she could see was the pale circle of yellow moving across the bare ground and Millie's skinny legs and Pa's underwear moving along in the middle of it.

The barn door, supported by one hinge, stood permanently open. The lantern began to drive back the reluctant shadows as they entered.

Spotty, the brindled cow, lay on her stomach, her front feet folded daintily beneath her. She swallowed noisily, blinked her brown eyes at the light, gulped up a fresh cud, and set her jaws to working at it.

Just beyond her, the red cow, Nellie, looked at them once, then turned her head away. Perhaps she smiled into the shadows, remembering how deftly she had set her hoof down on Pa's foot when he had impatiently tried to hurry up the milking process.

Millie raised the lantern high into the pungently sweet cow smell that hung heavily about them. "Ain't no place to hide in here, Pa," she said.

Pa pointed upward with his shotgun. "Could be hid in the mow," he said. He hobbled toward the ladder, then checked himself. "Purty big feller, ain't he?"

"Yes, Pa, he's real big."

"Best you go up and look, then, while I hold the gun. Iffen he's there, I'll have to shoot him dead fer sure!"

Millie hung back. "But he might get me—"

"Bosh!" Pa snorted. "Who'd want the likes of you!"

As Millie slowly ascended the ladder, Pa stood at the bottom of it and looked up. But Millie was holding the lantern high above her head with one hand, and her legs were

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only moving shadows under her short dress.

Millie reached the top of the ladder, swung her lantern around, and swiveled her head on her thin neck. "Ain't hide nor hair," she said, and came back down.

Pa wiped his bandaged foot against a pole at the edge of a stall. "Wish whoever stole that cow chain'd bring it back," he mumbled. "Cows been wanderin' all over the place."

A chill wind bit through Pa's underwear as they left the barn. "Better cut that fodder and get it in the mow tomorrow," he said. "Feels like snow-time's almost here, and I'm all crippled up."

As Millie lay on her straw tick that night in her little room, the usual gray loneliness, deep and bitter, pressed in on her from the shadows, and an age-old yearning filled her skinny body. It wasn't right that a girl should be denied all measure of birthright beauty; it wasn't right that a girl should never be looked at twice by a boy in her whole life. And it wasn't right for a girl to feel so all alone all the time with no one seeming to care one which way or another.

Her cat eyes stared into nothingness, and her fists clenched themselves into hard little balls of determination.

The sun of late October was warm and bright, and as she worked, Millie's body glowed with a pleasing moistness beneath her thin dress. There was no sound except for the swish and clump of her corn knife as it bit cleanly through the base of the cornstalks. There was a steely strength to the bare arm that swung the blade, and the neat piles of green-brown fodder that dotted the field gave evidence to Millie's endurance.

It was near mid-afternoon when she saw her mother leave the house, egg basket in hand, and come toward her along the lane that led past the field and down the little valley to the store a mile or so away.

"I'll take the eggs today 'stead of you," said Ma, as she came abreast. "Jest in case Honsey's about. And yore Pa is watchin' out from the winder with his gun."

"Maybe Honsey'll get after *you*, Ma," Millie warned.

"He best not!" Ma pulled a long butchering knife from beneath the cloth cover of her basket and waved it menacingly as she strode off.

Millie stuck her corn knife upright in the brown earth and watched her mother as she grew smaller and smaller down the lane and finally became lost from sight among the scrub oaks of the creek bottom. Ma would find some women to chat with at the store and would tell them all about how Honsey had chased her Millie last night and had near caught her. She would have an enjoyable afternoon.

Millie's gaze wandered toward the

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house. Pa was sitting in his rocking chair, gun across his knees, his bandaged foot thrust out through the open window. His chin had fallen to his chest. He was deep within his dinner-settlin' snooze, at peace with all the world.

She swore silently and spat on the ground, her fists clenching and unclenching; then she went to the end of the cornfield and placed a great bundle of fodder on the rope she had laid there. Cat eyes smouldering, lips tense, she drew the loose end of the rope through the ring at its other end and tightened it snugly around the bundle. Rope over shoulder, she dragged the heavy load through the stubble to the barn.

She let the bundle fall to the floor at the foot of the ladder, took the loose end of the rope in her hand, climbed the ladder, and pulled the shock up after her.

The floor of the mow was bare except for a pile of old hay in one corner. Rays of sunlight, knifing through the cracks in the walls and the holes in the roof, filled the place with sharp light and shadow.

Millie sat down on the bundle, wiped the damp hair from her eyes with a moist forearm, and felt the warmth and the smell of the mow creep in about her.

A slight rustle of sound broke the silence, and from behind the pile of hay rose a bullet head and a face with small eyes and a bland, childlike expression. Below the head was a short bull neck that broadened out into thick shoulders, then slanted away into long, apelike arms.

"They's still lookin' fer me, ain't they?" The voice was scarcely a whisper.

"They's still lookin', Honsey," Millie said. "And Pa said he'd shoot you dead—iffen he found you."

Honsey nodded. "I know. I heard him say it last night when you came back to the barn with the lantern." He turned and sat down on the hay and rested his big head in his hands.

"But I didn't do it," he said wearily. "I didn't hurt Sissie. I liked Sissie. Only someone who didn't like her would hurt her. She was so purty . . ."

"They won't believe you," Millie said. "They found yore cap right 'side her."

"She wanted me to give her somethin'," said Honsey. "And I didn't have nothin' to give her 'cept my new cap. So I give it to her—'cause I liked her. I liked Sissie."

Millie got up from her bundle and went over and sat down in the hay beside him. "But she's gone now, Honsey," she said softly. "She's gone. And there's only me. Now you've got to make love to me—jest the way I seen you make love to Sissie the day when . . ."

She broke off suddenly and bit her lower lip.

Honsey raised his head from his

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hands and turned to peer at her with his little eyes. A frown etched his smooth forehead, and a look of understanding took shape in his face.

"You—*you* did it, Millie," he said. "You didn't like her 'cause she was so purty! You did it and you let them blame me!"

She laid a thin hand on his arm. "They won't find you here, Honsey," she said, "not 'lessen I tell 'em!"

"And after you brought me the milk last night you lied to yore Pa so's he'd come here with his gun—"

"And tonight I'll bring you some apple pie with the milk!"

Honsey sat in silence for a long time, slowly shaking his head from side to side. "Iffen I could jest run away," he mumbled. "Jest run away."

He drew his left leg carefully up from the hay and began to rub the ankle with his big hands. "Millie," he said, "how long you goin' to keep me here?"

"I don't know, Honsey," she said, her narrowed cat-eyes swiftly inspecting the lock on the cow chain. "Maybe for a long, long time."

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A mad, mad, mad, mad spoof featuring the first appearance in print of a celebrated American amateur criminologist, a debonair dilettante detective very close to your Editors' heart, none other than—Mr. Celery Green . . .

THE ENGLISH VILLAGE MYSTERY

by ARTHUR PORGES

INSPECTOR DEWE EAST FOUND HIMself in a most annoying predicament. With a promotion to Assistant Commissioner about to be awarded either to him or to Inspector South, East had the bad luck to be stuck with the most difficult case of his career. If he bungled it, the prize would fall to his rival.

East's superior, Commissioner North, a cold, blustery type, was obviously displeased.

"I'm not an unreasonable man," he growled, "but after all, twelve murders in one village—and not a single clue to the identity of the criminal. It just won't do, East."

"I know," the Inspector said glumly. "But they happened so fast. A dozen killings in two weeks. Somebody must be taking a course in Speed Murder," he added, hoping to release some of the tension; but the quip only made Commissioner North more furious.

"Don't make jokes!" he roared. "This is a serious matter. It's not as if the murders happened in London. Big population there, so nobody misses twelve people. But Tottering-on-the-Brink is the smallest community in all England. Fourteen permanent inhabitants—and twelve already killed. Only two left—you must have *some* idea who the murderer is, East!"

"The whole thing's so irrational," the Inspector said. "No rhyme or reason to it—and not a smidgen of motive. But in a few more days I hope—"

"By then the village will be only a memory," North grunted. "And we'll be accused of messing up English history. I'll give you exactly forty-eight hours—not one minute more. After that, South gets the assignment."

He didn't say anything about the promotion, but East had no illusions. It was a matter of solve the case or lose out as new Assistant Commissioner.

"I'll get him," East said with cold determination. "You may count on it, sir."

"I just hope he doesn't get you," North said ungraciously. "So far he's way ahead on points. Well, go to it, man."

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In his desperation East decided to do the unforgivable, and consult a famous private detective. This was bad enough, since the Yard frowned on dealing with amateurs; but even worse was the fellow's non-English origin: he was an American, brash, airy, sometimes flippant, and given to hasty conclusions unsuited to the slow ways of British criminals. They objected to being captured before getting a good start on the job; always in a hurry, these blasted Yanks.

East knew that the American detective frequented a certain club when he visited London, and he found him there. It was not possible to miss him—he was so young, so cheerful, so self-assured. His name was Celery Green.

The American welcomed East with a warm smile, and led him to a secluded corner.

"Now, then, Inspector," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I've got just a few hours to catch a very clever killer," East explained. "I've never asked for help in my life before, but this is a crisis."

"What are the circumstances?" Celery Green was no longer the nonchalant dilettante.

"Twelve murders. No motive. No point to them. Not a clue. That's the whole story in a nutshell."

"Who were the victims?" Celery said crisply.

"They all lived in Tottering-on-the-Brink. You've heard of it—the smallest village in England. Total population—fourteen people. No, fifteen now—a Mrs. Willow moved in three weeks ago. It isn't everybody can increase the population of a place by more than seven per cent," he added.

"An outsider, eh?" Celery looked thoughtful. "Surely an obvious suspect. Why not pick her up and—"

"Not so fast," East objected. "Not so obvious a suspect as you might think. In most of the murders the killer must have been known to the victim, d'you see. They're a suspicious, insular lot there in Tottering. No one who hadn't lived in town for decades could get into the homes or stand alongside the victims. The last person—before Mrs. Willow—to come there was Miss Bristol, and they called her 'the stranger' for sixteen years, I'm told."

"The same sort of thing happens in New England," Celery admitted. "I could tell you about a town called Wrightsville—but carry on, Inspector."

"I can give you the names of the victims, as well as other information about them," East suggested.

"Good—let's have it." Celery was crisp again. "And details about the murder weapons, if you please."

East took out his notebook.

"Let's see. The first to be murdered was Elsie Fyfe—stabbed through the heart from behind. Then came George Barton; some-

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body dropped a huge box of groceries—mainly tinned stuff, which is heavy—on him from a bluff over the ocean. He was lying on the sand; horrible mess. Besides being bashed, he was drowned in tinned soup.

"Major Pickett-Hall came next; he was banged on the head. Ram Dass, a Hindu, was killed in his garage—knocked out, and then finished off with car exhaust. Jane Hope was strangled; and so was Norman Quire. Harry Block had his skull smashed in with a big stone. Walter Lord was decapitated—'orrible!" In his agitation the Inspector lost an "h".

"That's eight." Celery was counting on his fingers. "Four more to go."

"Right—I have them all listed. The ninth was Amy Bristol—believe I mentioned her. She was shot through the heart. And John Mahony; he was poisoned—not quickly, either. Bad show, that. Then came Mabel Slaughter; she was drowned in her own bathtub."

"More likely than being drowned in somebody's else's," Celery said drily. "That makes eleven. One more to go. Who was last?"

"Allen Gladstone Rigg-White, the Mayor; fancy that. Blown to bits, poor chap."

Celery's silver eyes shone, and East held his breath. It was said that this energetic young American had amazed professionals with his brilliance. Was he the magician he was reputed to be? Would he pull a rabbit out of his hat? Inspector East almost wished he had some lettuce handy.

"Let me take your list," Celery was saying. "And the details about the weapons?"

"It's all down in here," East said, laying the notebook on the table. "I certainly hope you can find some kind of pattern—it baffles me completely. And now there are only three left alive. One *must* be the killer. If we don't get him, Tottering-on-the-Brink will become a ghost town. An English village will have vanished from the face of the earth." East sighed.

"No time for sentiment," Celery said briskly. "And the three survivors?"

"The newcomer, Mrs. Adele Willow; a Hector Guedalla; and a Miss Orange."

The great American detective rose. "Go home, Inspector—get a good night's sleep, and come back here tomorrow morning. I'll have the solution by then."

East gaped at him.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm conceited," Celery said frankly. "See you tomorrow, Inspector."

East thanked him in a choked voice, and with his eyes slightly glazed, left. He hoped this brash young man could keep his promise. It was East's only chance for the coveted promotion.

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Early the next morning Inspector East made a beeline for the club. Sure enough, Celery Green was already there, quivering with suppressed energy.

"Any luck?" the Inspector demanded eagerly.

"It's not a matter of luck," the young detective said, trying to sound casual. "It's a matter of brains, imagination, and above all, of logic."

East mumbled an apology.

"We'll go to Tottering-on-the-Brink at once," Celery said crunchily, "and capture our killer."

"But who—?" East began, only to be interrupted by a page.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Inspector," the page said.

With an exclamation of impatience East strode off. When he returned, his eyes were hard.

"Guedalla's been killed," he reported. "Now we're down to just two—and both women, by gad!"

"Guedalla killed?" Celery exclaimed, his voice pithy with astonishment. "But that's impossible! How did it happen?"

"Run down by a car," East said savagely. "One of those huge American things," he added, giving Celery a reproachful look.

Celery shook his head slowly.

"If I weren't infallible," he said, "I'd almost think my solution was wrong. But if not Guedalla," he murmured, "then it must be—of course!" He grabbed East's arm. "We've got to hurry," he said. "Mrs. Willow is in great danger. She's due to be smothered any minute!"

"But—but—" the Inspector objected, only to be hustled out to Celery's car, an ancient Duesenberg. Moments later they were tearing through London on the way to Tottering-on-the-Brink.

When they arrived at the village, which was oddly quiet—thanks, no doubt, to the devastating drop in population—Celery had East direct him to Mrs. Willow's house. To their delight the woman was unharmed. Nobody had been near her, she said; my, weren't things quiet today.

The two men withdrew, East giving her a suspicious stare.

"She's killed Miss Orange," Celery muttered. "But how was it done? It's just not possible! Is my theory all wrong?" His voice died away to a querulous mumble.

The Inspector was bursting with curiosity, but he realized this was no time to ask questions. Instead, he led the way to Miss Orange's cottage. There a distressing sight awaited them. The dowdy, plump body of the owner of the cottage was hanging by a rope at the back of the house.

"This makes no sense at all!" East exclaimed. "Wait. Mrs. Willow must have hanged the poor woman—that's it." He turned to Celery. "We must stop that killer before—"

He broke off, remembering with a shock that if Mrs. Willow were

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guilty, eventually to be hanged, it was too late for Tottering-on-the-Brink: its population would be zero.

"Forget the Willow woman," Celery said calmly. "Look at the note that Miss Orange left." He handed it to East.

The Inspector read it, his eyes popping.

"Suicide," he groaned. His face showed bewilderment. "I don't understand any of this, Celery."

"It's quite simple," the young American assured him. "Let's examine those names and weapons again. Elsie Fyfe—stabbed by a knife. George Barton—crushed by a carton. Ram Dass—suffocated with gas. Pickett-Hall—bashed by a round object; hard and heavy. I'd say a cricket ball! Don't you see? Fyfe—knife. Barton—carton. Dass—gas. Pickett-Hall—cricket ball."

East gulped. "But—but—" he gurgled.

"Coincidences? Is that what you're thinking? Then let me go on," and Celery crackled, "Jane Hope—strangled with a rope. Norman Quire too—but with a copper wire. And Harry Block's head was smashed not with a stone, but with a rock. Walter Lord—decapitated with a sword."

"You mean—" East began thickly.

"Let me finish. Amy Bristol—shot with a pistol. John Mahony—poisoned with antimony—slow and nasty, as you said. And Mabel Slaughter was drowned in her bath. She died from—" he paused dramatically—"water."

The Inspector had himself under control again, his trained mind working efficiently.

"Look, Celery," he protested. "What about Rigg-White? That scuttles your theory—names and weapons rhyming. What murder weapon rhymes with Rigg-White?"

The younger man smiled.

"Rigg-White was blown up," he reminded East. "You wrote down the means yourself in your notebook. Rigg-White—gelignite. Q.E.D."

"I must say," the Inspector admitted weakly, "it does seem logical—in a peculiar sort of way. But who—?"

"A mad poet, of course—I saw that late last night," Celery said. "For a short time I thought it was Guedalla. But when he too was killed, I thought—but never mind. Miss Orange was our murderess."

"But why did she commit suicide? And what kept her from killing the Willow woman?"

"Ah," Celery said. "That's the crux of the matter. Think of this, East: all the victims were either men or unmarried women—in short, people who use their own surnames. Now Miss Orange obviously hated all those whose names could be rhymed; hers couldn't, you know. No sonnets or love poems from the boys for Miss Orange. So she set about to kill the others, and always

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with a weapon that rhymed with the victim's name. Simple, isn't it?"

"But what about Mrs. Willow? She could have been smothered with a pillow—you did say she was in danger of being smothered."

"Or drowned in a billow," Celery added complacently. "But look at this copy of the local paper, printed before Miss Orange—ah—removed the editor. It mentions that Mrs. Willow's maiden name was Silver. Now, there's no rhyme for silver in the English language. Miss Orange was so frustrated that, being obviously unbalanced anyway, she killed herself instead. She couldn't, in all conscience, murder Mrs. Willow under her husband's name. You see that, of course."

"It's all clear now," East said. "Maybe the Commissioner will go easy in the circumstances. A very baffling case—the most baffling in the history of Scotland Yard." Then his face darkened. "Half a mo', Celery. What about Guedalla? What about him, hey?"

"The big American car that ran him down," Celery said, smiling triumphantly. "Without even checking—a pound to a ha'penny, Inspector, I'm betting it was an Impala!"

And Celery stalked off.

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A look, a deep look, into a man's mind, into his heart, into his (is there another word?) soul . . . Surely this is a strange and haunting and paradoxical story—so unreal, yet so true; so diaphanous, yet so definite; so prosaic, yet so magical; so—what shall we say? How can one put a word to that which in essence is wordless? How can one describe a story in which we know nothing—and yet know everything . . .

"And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name."

ANOTHER BRIDGE TO CROSS

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

THE TOP OF THE CAR WAS DOWN, and Merrick saw the man on the bridge from a good distance away. The car in which Merrick rode was speeding toward the bridge, and Merrick thought: "It's like something in a Bergman film. The man has a gun in his hand now, and when the car gets so near the bridge he can't miss, he'll fire at me. I'll be hit through the chest—and that's probably just as well."

Merrick kept looking at the hunched figure on the bridge—the man was leaning over the rail—both because he expected catastrophe, and because the man on the bridge was the only human figure in the landscape. They were on the southern Riviera. The Mediterranean's serene blueness lay on their left, and on the right were powdery green olive fields that looked in need of water; the fields straggled up the hills until they were stopped by the rocky feet of mountains. The bridge spanned a road, and was at least two stories high.

But the man did not move as Merrick's car reached the bridge. Merrick saw a breeze stir the man's dark hair. Suddenly the danger was over.

Then, above the roar of an oncoming truck on the road below, Merrick heard a faint thud, as if a sandbag had fallen off the back of his car. He turned around, raising himself slightly. "Stop!" he shouted to his driver.

A dark blob lay on the road under the bridge, and Merrick looked around just in time to see the truck pass over it with the left pair of its enormous double tires. The truck screeched to a halt. The driver was

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getting out. Merrick pulled his hand down his forehead, over his eyes.

"What happened?" asked Merrick's driver, yanking his sunglasses off, squinting behind him to see. He backed up the car.

"A man was killed. Down there on the road," Merrick said.

The driver reversed the car neatly to the extreme right side of the upper road, pulled the handbrake, and jumped out.

For a few moments Merrick's driver and the truck driver engaged in an animated conversation which Merrick could not hear. Merrick did not get out of the car. The truck driver had pulled the body onto the grass at the side of the lower road. No doubt he was explaining to Merrick's driver that he could not possibly have stopped because the man had jumped right out in front of him.

"Dio mio," Merrick's driver said, coming back and getting into the car. "A suicide. Not an old man, either." The driver shook his head glumly.

Merrick said nothing.

They drove on.

After ten minutes the driver said, "A pity you don't like Amalfi, signore."

"Yes. Well—" Merrick was in no mood for talking. His Italian was limited to a basic vocabulary, which however he knew thoroughly and pronounced correctly. Amalfi was where he had had his honeymoon 25 years ago. No use mentioning that to an Italian from Messina who was only about 30 himself.

They stopped at a village that Merrick had seen on the map in Palermo and had inquired about. The tourist agent said, "Very pretty, very quiet," so Merrick intended to try it. He had telephoned from Messina and booked a room and private bath. The driver took him to the hotel, and Merrick paid him off, tipping him so well that the driver broke into a big smile.

"Many thanks, signore. May you enjoy your holiday here!" Then he was gone, back to Messina.

The Hotel Paradiso was very pretty, but not what Merrick wanted. He knew this after two minutes' inspection of its main hall with its inner court of little fruit trees and a Sixteenth Century well, open to the sky. The tiles of the floors were lovely, and the view of the Mediterranean from his window was as commanding as one from the bridge of a ship. But it was not what Merrick wanted.

Nevertheless, he stayed the night, and the next morning he hired a car to go on. While he waited in the hotel for the car to arrive, he looked in the small local newspaper for anything about the man who had jumped from the bridge.

It was a short item on the second page. The suicide's name was Dino Bartucci; he was 32, an unemployed mason, with a wife and five children (the children's names and ages were

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given, and all were under ten); Bartucci's wife was in poor health, and he himself had been extremely depressed and anxious for some months. Twice he had said to friends, "If I were dead, the State would at least give my wife and children a small pension."

Merrick knew how small that pension must be. Here was the extreme, Merrick thought, of human anxiety: poverty, a sick wife, hungry children, and no work. And he found it mysterious that he had correctly anticipated death the moment he had glimpsed the man, but that he had imagined it turned against himself.

Merrick got into the car with the new driver. At one o'clock they reached Amalfi and stopped for lunch. The driver went off by himself with the thousand lire Merrick gave him for his meal, and Merrick lunched at a hotel whose dining terrace overlooked the sea.

He had been here for lunch or dinner a couple of times with Helena, but he did not dwell on that as he slowly ate the good meal. He found that being in Amalfi did not trouble him. Why should it? The hotel where he and Helena had stayed had been destroyed one winter in a landslide caused by heavy rains. They had rebuilt it, of course, and in the former style, Merrick had heard; but somehow he was sure this was not quite true. There would have been a few changes, probably of enlargement, and they could not have recovered every rock and stone and tree.

But even if the hotel had remained exactly the same, Merrick would not have gone back to it now. He knew that his own memory in 25 years must have undergone slow changes, and that the restored hotel would be a shock—a useless and disturbing shock.

Merrick lingered over his lunch, then had a leisurely coffee and brandy down on the main plaza. It was nearly five o'clock before they drove on.

The next town of any size was Positano. It was the end of the day, and a huge orange sun was just dropping into the sea beyond the purple hump of Capri. Merrick imagined that he heard the sun hiss as it touched the water, but the hiss was the lapping of waves against the rocky cliffs below. Positano, though objectively beautiful in its curve of mountains—like the banked benches of an amphitheater whose stage was the flat sea in front—looked no more inviting to Merrick than a half dozen other villages he had seen.

Still, he told the driver that he would stay here for the night. The driver was quite surprised, because Merrick had previously told him they might drive on to Naples and even to Rome. Merrick said he would pay him what he would have paid him to go to Rome, and this pleased the driver.

"I know the best hotel here,

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signore. Shall I take you there?"

Merrick did not want to come to a decision so soon. "No. Drive through the town first."

The road took them above the town, round the semicircumference of the amphitheater. There were no roads in the town proper, only steps and slanting footpaths.

"What about this one?" Merrick said, indicating a hotel on their left. Its wrought-iron sign said Hotel Orlando; the sign was flat and black against the white front of the hotel.

"Very well." The driver pulled into the parking area in front of the hotel.

A bellboy came out.

It was probably a very ordinary hotel, Merrick thought, but it looked rather expensive, so he supposed it would be clean and the service good. Merrick paid off the driver and tipped him.

Merrick undressed in his room and had a slow hot bath. Then he put on his dressing gown and ordered a half bottle of champagne to be sent to his room. With the cheer of the champagne he forced himself to write a post card to his sister in New York and to his daughter-in-law, both of whom were worried about him. To both he wrote the same thing:

> Having a very enjoyable time, resting as prescribed. Joining the Dennises in Munich soon. Hope you are well. Don't worry. Much love.
>
> Charles

His doctors had told him to rest for two hours in bed every afternoon. Merrick had done this until Palermo, but not since—not for the past three days. Four months ago his wife Helena and their only child, Adam, had been killed in a collision on a New Jersey parkway in a car driven by Adam. Merrick had not reacted too badly at first, but he had three months later. He had to stop going to his office at Merrick Weaves, Inc. in White Plains—not really because he felt as bad as the doctors thought he did, but because his going seemed to have no purpose. The textile factory continued to produce just as well without him as with him.

His sister Wynne had come to stay with him in his White Plains house, but since she had a household of her own, that couldn't go on forever. Her presence in the big empty house, wonderful as Wynne was, had really not touched Merrick's melancholia, though he had pretended to her that he felt better. He lost weight even though it seemed to him, perhaps because of the effort it took, that he was poking the same amount of food into himself as he always had.

He had not realized that he loved Helena so much, that he had needed her simply to exist. The loss of her, plus his son just out of college, just finished with his military service, just married, just ready to start living—it had all been enough to shake his faith in everything he

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had lived by until then. The virtues of hard work, honesty, respect for one's fellow man—everything seemed suddenly thin and abstract.

His inner convictions had become ghostlike, whereas the bodies of his wife and son in the funeral chapel had been as tangible as stone. The emptiness of his home had been real; at the same time Merrick knew that millions of men had been through this before, since the beginning of time. There was nothing unusual or original about his feelings. It was what people called "life"—the two deaths in his life, and their aftermath.

Finally, his doctors had recommended a leisurely trip through Europe, but before endorsing this prescription they made sure that Merrick planned to see friends in London, Paris, Rome, and Munich, and that the friends were the kind who would have time to spend with him. Though his boat went to Genoa, Merrick had left it in Lisbon, its first port, and had taken another boat to Palermo. The Martins in Rome wanted him to stay with them for a week in their large house on the Via Appia Antica. Merrick hoped to make it no more than an overnight stay, on the excuse that the Dennises were expecting him in Munich earlier than he had thought. The Dennises lived in Zurich and were coming to Munich especially to join him. From Munich they were to drive to Venice, then into Yugoslavia and down its coast.

Dinner was served at eight, Merrick had been told. At seven thirty he wandered into the garden behind the terrace where all the tables were set for dinner. The garden was dimly lighted by a few candles in glasses set along the low stone wall and on nearly buried stones in the grass.

It was a wild garden—if one could call it a garden at all; but as soon as Merrick saw it he became entranced. There was a glider on the left, half hidden by a low tree, where two people sat, with a small table in front of them for drinks. There was no one else in the garden. Far behind—black now since the sun had gone down—rose the huge mountains that seemed very close, walling the garden in. The candlelight lit up the faces of the couple in the glider—like the faces of children around a lighted Halloween pumpkin. Perhaps they were newlyweds, Merrick thought. Something about them suggested it—not their physical closeness because they were not even touching each other, but their quiet happiness and their youth.

A guitar began to play. It seemed to come from below, where the ground fell in dark clumps of bush and tree—though there was nothing down there, and no light. The guitar was unaccompanied, yet it had the richness of three instruments playing together. The song drifted toward him in an easy, self-confident manner. Its melody line was long and intricate, down to a

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bass note that seemed to vibrate in Merrick's blood when the guitar player came to it now and again.

Merrick realized it was probably only a popular song, yet now it seemed far better—almost like an aria destined to be famous, from an opera by a great composer. Merrick took a deep breath. There had been just such a song in Amalfi when he and Helena had been there. He had never heard the song since, and he and Helena had never taken the trouble to find out its name or to buy a record of it to take back to the States. It had simply been played, also on a guitar, now and then in the evening at their hotel. They had known it would turn up, like a certain bird at sunset, and somehow it had not seemed fitting to ask its name, or to ask a musician to play it for them; it had its own times of turning up.

At dinner Merrick had a table, which might have seated four, to himself, placed against a decorative rail of the terrace. Bougainvillea grew up from below and climbed the rail—so close that a pale purple clump of it lay on the white tablecloth beside his right hand. Merrick looked around at his fellow diners. There were more young people than old. He saw the newlyweds, still engrossed in each other, at a table in the center of the terrace.

In the far corner sat a middle-aged woman with light brown hair—a very well-dressed woman who looked American, eating by herself. Merrick blinked and stared at her, then at the corner—less than a right angle—made by the terrace and the rail behind her. It was exactly like a certain corner of the terrace in the hotel at Amalfi. There had been bougainvillea there, too. But the rest of the hotel was not like the hotel in Amalfi—not like it, and yet just enough like it. There had been, for instance, a garden, left rather in a state of nature, in the Amalfi hotel—a garden very much like this one.

Then, at last, Merrick realized he had come to the right place.

"Finished with the antipasto, signore?"

Merrick's plate was taken away, and the smiling Italian waiter, who looked no more than sixteen, held a large tray of fettucini for him to help himself. This was followed by roast veal, a green salad, then a large basket of fruit from which Merrick chose a pear, and finally a dessert. Merrick ordered coffee served to him in the garden, and he drank it standing at the garden rail, though there was no one now in the glider or in the two deck chairs near it.

The woman with the light brown hair and small pendant earrings came into the garden, and bent her head to light a cigarette. Her lighter only sparked.

"Allow me?" said Merrick, coming toward her, pulling his lighter out of his jacket pocket with his free hand.

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"Oh!—I didn't see anybody there. Thank you."

She was not in the least like Helena, though when he had seen her sitting in the corner of the terrace, he had thought for a moment she was—like Helena as she might have looked today, if she were sitting in the corner of the Amalfi hotel terrace.

"You've just arrived, haven't you?" said the woman pleasantly. Her blue eyes had little crinkles of lines around them. Her face was suntanned.

"Yes. You've been here a long while?"

"Five weeks. I come here every year. I paint at the local art school. Mostly as a hobby, you understand. You must come and see our school. Come before twelve thirty, because it closes then, and we can all go down to the beach for lunch."

Merrick made a little bow. "Thank you. I would like to." He hesitated, then drifted away.

The next morning he passed the art school, which was in an old palace with huge doors that stood open to an inner loggia and court; but he decided not to go in. He went down and stared at the water and the bathers for a while, bought the New York and the London *Times* at the newspaper store, and while he was sitting on the low cement parapet above the beach, a small boy came up and asked him if he would like a shine.

Merrick looked at him and smiled with amusement. "A shine? For these shoes?" Merrick was wearing dark blue espadrilles.

The boy was grinning, too. His pale blue trousers were dirty and had a patch on one knee. "I can ask, can't I?"

"Besides, you haven't any equipment," Merrick said. "Where's your polish?"

"Here," the boy said, slapping a pocket that obviously contained nothing. "Fifty lire. Cheap!"

Merrick laughed. "I'll buy you an ice cream cone instead. Here—" He pulled some change out of his pocket. "Here's fifty lire." Merrick got up as if motivated by a force not his own. "Let's get an ice cream cone."

They went to the gelateria on the beachfront, the boy skipping in circles about Merrick as if Merrick were some captive he was throwing invisible ropes around. Merrick bought him a double chocolate cone. It put a wide border of sticky brown around the boy's mouth.

"Where are you from in America? Why are you here? How long are you staying? Have you got a car? Have you got a boat? Have you got a wife? Have you got a big house in America? How old are you?"

Merrick answered all the questions honestly, without restraint, smiling, even to the "No" that he said when the boy asked if he had a wife.

The boy accompanied him to the

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Post Office, where he had to post an airmail letter to Merrick Weaves, then walked on up the road with him toward his hotel. Merrick was charmed by the boy's naturalness, his utter lack of inhibition—the boy paused by the roadside to urinate, not even stepping behind a tree—and he almost invited the boy into the hotel. He could have ordered iced lemonade and cake as a treat. But he thought it was probably not the thing to do.

Suddenly Merrick wished he could be as free as this child. The boy made him think of a small puppy with the miraculous ability to talk.

That evening Merrick was even more delighted with the Hotel Orlando. The guitar played the wonderful song again. Merrick was so lost in his dreams of Helena that he scarcely heard the few remarks of the waiter, and only replied by gestures. He had coffee at the table.

"Good evening! We're playing bridge in the lounge tonight, and I wonder if you'd like to join us? Just myself and Mr. and Mrs. Gifford. Have you met them?" It was the American woman with the light brown hair.

Merrick looked at her as though she were a thousand miles away instead of right by his table. Her voice had even sounded faint, and now suddenly he could not even remember what she had said. At last he got to his feet. "Good evening, I—"

"You're not ill are you?" she asked.

"No."

"Good. So many people do get ill here at first." She smiled.

"I went by the art school, but I didn't go in," Merrick said, remembering she had said something about the school.

"Oh. Well, any time for that. What about bridge?"

Merrick suddenly saw the suicide on the bridge, all over again, and again pulled his hand down his face. "No, thank you. I don't like it," he said gently.

The woman's face looked surprised. "Oh, that's all right. Sorry." And with a faint smile she was gone.

The next day Merrick did not leave the hotel until afternoon. The small boy was on the beach again, standing and chatting with a young couple who looked English; but when he saw Merrick he detached himself with a wave of his hand to the couple, and came running.

"Hello! How are you today? What have you been doing? Why weren't you here this morning? How much did your shirt cost? Were you born in America?"

They walked along the beach, picking up interesting pebbles and fragments of colored tiles, worn smooth by the water. The boy chatted with some fishermen who were sitting on the sand mending long, rust-colored nets. The fishermen called him Seppe or Guiseppe, and laughed and winked at Merrick as they talked with him. Merrick

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could understand little of what they said, because it was all in dialect.

Seppe was barefoot and thin, but in his eyes and laughing mouth Merrick saw the vitality of a people that poverty could never crush. Merrick thought of the suicide Bartucci's children, and knew the same vitality would be in them, though perhaps not the laughter, not now. He decided to send the widow some money. He remembered the name of the town to the south where she lived. He could send a money order, anonymously. This thought made him feel happy.

"Seppe," he said as they walked past the net menders. "Would you like to have dinner with me in my hotel tonight?"

"Ah-h-h!" Seppe stopped, crouched with his hands in an attitude of prayer, and beamed up at Merrick. "Momma mia, si!"

"But you've got to be quiet at dinner. And maybe you have some cleaner pants?"

"Ah, si! I've got a real suit at home!"

"Wear it. Dinner is at eight. Not too late for you?"

"*Late?*" Seppe said, insulted, laughing.

That evening Merrick was standing on the steps of the hotel at seven thirty, fearing that Seppe would be early. He was. He was wearing his "real" suit, new and brown and too big for him, but his shoes were worn and needed a shine. His wetted black hair showed the marks of a comb.

"Hello!" the boy called loudly to Merrick, but his eyes darted everywhere else, taking in the splendor.

"Hello," Merrick said. "We have time for a lemonade or something. Let's go in the garden."

They went into the garden. Merrick found a waiter and ordered one lemonade and one Cinzano. In the garden the boy continued to chatter and peer at everything, but for once Merrick did not listen to him. Merrick lifted his head a little and listened to the guitar music, gazed at the tree-sheltered glider in which the newlyweds again sat, and he dreamed. The boy did not seem to mind. He drank his lemonade thirstily between his sentences.

At dinner the boy ate heartily of everything, and had a glass of Merrick's wine. Seppe declared that he was going to be a hotelkeeper when he grew up. He accepted Merrick's offer of a second helping of dessert. Afterward, the boy put one hand over his stomach, closed his eyes and said, "Oooooh," but he was feeling very well. Merrick smoked over his coffee. They had taken long over dinner, and the terrace was almost deserted.

"Can I go to the toilet?" asked the boy.

"Certainly. It's inside that door —" Merrick pointed, got it wrong, shook his head, and then pointed to the right door. "You'll see a door saying Signori. *Not* the Signore."

Seppe smiled and dashed away.

He was gone quite a while, Mer-

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rick thought, though he was not sure, and automatically he looked at his watch—as if that could tell him anything, for he hadn't the slightest idea what time the boy left. Then just as Merrick turned around, the boy appeared, on his way back.

"Can I have a cigarette?" It was the second time Seppe had asked him.

"I'm afraid not," Merrick said, refusing for the second time, though he felt himself relenting. Alone, he would have given the boy a cigarette. "Why don't we take a little walk?"

They walked up the road that went past the hotel. Seppe was quieter, as if the darkness had muted him.

"Where do you live?" Merrick asked.

"Down there." Seppe pointed behind him.

"We should walk that way then. It's getting late." Merrick turned.

When they came to the Hotel Orlando again, Seppe waved a hand and said, "I'll see you tomorrow on the beach. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye," Merrick said.

"Grazie!"

"Prego!"

Merrick went into his hotel. As he crossed the lobby, the manager, a man of about forty with a thin mustache, came toward him.

"Signor Merrick—ah—" He beckoned Merrick into a corner of the lobby. But before he could speak, a large-breasted blonde Italian woman came up and joined them.

"Signore, excuse me," she said to Merrick, "we cannot take street boys into our hotel. Never!"

"Signore—Just a minute, Eleanora, I will talk to him. First of all, we are not sure."

"Ah-h, sure enough!" said Eleanora.

"Signore," continued the manager, "there has been a robbery."

Now the American woman with the light brown hair was walking toward them. "Hello. Look—I'm not trying to make any accusations, but my gold compact and my gold cigarette lighter—"

"And my fifty thousand lire," Eleanora put in.

"All I had in this bag," said the American woman, holding out a tapestry bag to show Merrick. "I didn't miss anything till two minutes ago. The only time it was out of my sight was when I had it on the table in the Ladies' Room for two minutes."

"A clever thief. He put rocks in it to weight it," said Eleanora. "Show them."

"Yes," said the American woman, smiling a little. "Stones from the beach."

Merrick looked into her open pocketbook and saw some broken tiles of the sort he and Seppe had gathered that afternoon.

"Did that street boy leave you this evening to go to the toilet?"

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asked Eleanora. "He did. I saw him leave the table. That boy, I know him, I know his face. He is not a good boy. They call him Seppe. What is his last name?" She frowned as if the name would come to her, and looked at the manager. Then to Merrick, "Where does he live?"

"I don't know," Merrick said in a daze. "I am sure he *didn't*," he said earnestly.

But despite his conviction Merrick was completely overridden. The manager went to the desk to call the police. The blonde Italian woman continued to rant about street boys in decent hotels; the American woman was downcast over her gold compact and lighter, but she was not angry at Merrick.

"I will certainly do what I can," Merrick said. But he hadn't the least idea what to do.

Somehow Merrick and the American woman found themselves out in the garden. Each was having a brandy. Merrick was jolted by its sharpness in his mouth. He tried to listen to what the woman was saying. But it seemed of no importance whatever; it seemed they were waiting for something. When Merrick finally looked at his watch, it was after midnight.

The hotel manager came out to tell them that the police had gone to the boy's home, but that the boy had not come home. "His name is Dell' Isola. He lives up in Città Morta." He waved an arm at another section of the town, which Merrick knew sat halfway up a mountain. "Signora, I am sorry. The morning should shed some light." The manager smiled, and left.

The next thing Merrick was really conscious of was the hot water in his bath. He could not believe that Seppe was a thief. No, it was too absurd. The stones—they could have been put there by anybody. Certainly it was a clever action, the action of an old, experienced criminal.

The next morning at nine, when Merrick came out of his room, the manager greeted him in the hall and said, "Well, the boy is home this morning. He came in very late last night, his mother said. But of course they deny everything. No money, no compact, nothing. They are together, the whole family." He waggled his hand, palm downward. "The police searched the house, of course."

"Well—you see?" Merrick replied calmly. "I'm sorry it happened, but you see it wasn't Seppe."

The manager's lips parted, but he did not say anything.

Merrick walked on. In the lobby the desk clerk handed him a telegram that he said had just come in. It was from the Dennises.

DON'T WORRY. YOU ARE AHEAD SCHEDULE. STILL IN ZURICH. MUNICH SENT US TELEGRAM. SEE YOU SOON MUNICH. LOVE. BETTY-ALEX.

He must have wired them that he would be late for Munich, Mer-

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rick realized. But when had he sent the wire? He didn't remember sending it. He only remembered feeling intensely a couple of days ago that he must stay on at the Hotel Orlando, and that he didn't want any engagements to pry him away.

Merrick stopped at the small bank of the town and cashed $2000 in Travellers Cheques into lire. Then he took the lire to the Post Office and made out four money orders for lire to the equivalent of five hundred dollars each, and sent them to Mrs. Dino Bartucci in the little town to the south.

Seppe was not down at the beach that morning. Merrick lunched at a beachfront restaurant, and about two he saw Seppe hopping down the plaza steps on one bare foot, his hands in his pockets. Then the boy whirled in circles, his eyes shut, like a blind dancer. From these antics, Merrick knew that Seppe had seen him, no doubt before Merrick had caught sight of the boy. At last Seppe drifted over, hands still in his pockets, and stood there with a timid smile.

"Well, good afternoon," said Merrick.

"Hi."

"I hear the police called on you last night. This morning, too."

"Yes, but they didn't find anything. Why should they?" His hands flew out. "I didn't have anything." Seppe's eyes were earnest and intense.

Merrick smiled and relaxed. "No, I didn't think you did."

"Gesu Maria! Police in *my* house!" He glanced around to see if anyone were listening, though he had not spoken loudly; the man at the nearest table was buried behind the Paris *Herald Tribune*. "I never had police in *my* house before. What did you tell them?"

"Well—I certainly didn't tell them to go looking for you. It was the hotel manager's idea. Sit down, Seppe.—They thought you robbed a woman's pocketbook. I couldn't stop them from going to your house."

Seppe said something under his breath that Merrick could not understand, and then the boy shook his head vigorously.

"I've just had lunch," Merrick said. "Would you like something?"

They spent the afternoon together, taking a carozza ride around the town, and shooting rifles at a booth in a corner of the plaza. But Seppe did not walk all the way back to the hotel with Merrick. He stopped at the last curve in the road before the hotel, and said with an air of contempt (for the hotel) that he didn't care to walk any farther.

"Okay," Merrick said agreeably. "Well—take it easy, Seppe. See you tomorrow."

The Italian woman who had been robbed did not speak to Merrick that evening, or even nod to him. Merrick didn't care. She associated

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him with her loss—mistakenly—but there was nothing he could do about it. Merrick sat long in the glider after dinner, alone and dreaming.

Seppe seemed much happier the next day, and also the day after that when he announced that his father was going to buy a television set.

Merrick looked at Seppe and thought: *Could* it be that he had stolen all those lire, the gold compact and lighter? Merrick frowned. No. His whole mind and heart rejected the idea. "Seppe, you did not take the money from the lady's pocketbook, did you?"

They were leaning against an inverted fishing boat on the beach.

"No," Seppe said, but less positively than three days before.

Merrick frowned, and forced himself to say, "I'll give you—ten thousand lire if you tell me the truth."

Seppe grinned mischievously. "Let's see the ten thousand."

"Tell me the truth first."

"All right. I stole it," he said softly.

Merrick began to breathe shallowly, as if a weight sat on his chest. *I don't believe you*, he thought. And he made no move to reach for the lire.

"Where is the ten thousand?" the boy demanded.

"I don't believe you. Prove that you stole it."

"Prove it?" The mischievous grin grew wider. Seppe pulled a hand slowly from his pocket, and looked around him as the hand came out in a fist. The fist opened, and in his palm lay a lipstick which looked like gold, but which wasn't, Merrick knew, though it was obviously expensive. It was set with small red stones that sparkled like rubies. The lipstick case seemed to scream that it was American, and the possession of the rich woman with the light brown hair.

Now Merrick believed. He saw it all in a rush—Seppe spilling out the loot in his house, the fifty thousand lire being hidden somewhere, the gold compact and the gold lighter whisked off by someone, maybe an older brother, to be sold in Rome.

Merrick ground his teeth and set them together. Then he walked away. He walked slowly. Seppe tagged after him, asking him questions in an anxious tone, pleading with him, hanging finally to Merrick's wrist; but Merrick paid no attention to him. Merrick walked on past the place where people turned to go into the town. He walked along the beach, and finally Seppe hung back and Merrick was alone.

That night Merrick sat so long in the garden that a busboy, who had come to collect the glasses of the candles that had burned out, told him that they were about to close the gates. Merrick detested walking into the hotel hall, into his room. It was like living that naked,

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painful moment all over again, when he had learned beyond doubt that Seppe was a thief . . .

In the morning post Merrick received his four money orders with their envelopes unopened. On each one was stamped *DEFUNTO*, the Italian word for deceased. They had mistaken Signora for Signor, Merrick thought, though on each envelope, Signora was clearly spelled out. Merrick went straight to the Post Office with the envelopes.

"Ah, si," said the woman behind the money-order window. "We noticed these this morning. No, it is not a mistake—the wife is dead also." She turned around. "Luigi! Come here a moment."

A dark-haired young man in shirtsleeves came over, glanced at the envelopes, and said, "Ah, si!" then looked at Merrick. "Si, signore, I happen to know, because I have a cousin who lives in that town. The mother killed herself and her five children. Just two or three days ago."

Merrick was stunned. "You're sure?"

"Sure, signore. Defunto was stamped in the other village. Besides, my cousin wrote me."

"Thank you." Merrick gathered his envelopes together. One, two, three, four. Each seemed to be a slap in his face.

"Signore!—You must cash them," said the woman at the window, and Merrick turned back. "What can you do with them?" she asked rhetorically, with a smile and a shrug. "You knew the woman, too?"

Merrick shook his head. "No."

Five minutes later he walked out of the Post Office with a piece of paper that would enable him to get the money from the town bank. He went back to the hotel and sat in the garden. He missed lunch, and only reluctantly left the garden at eight to bathe and then to have dinner.

That night he told the busboy that he wished to spend the night in the garden, whether they locked the gates or not.

"It becomes cold, signore," said the boy.

"Not too cold."

It did become cold toward dawn, but Merrick did not mind it. He changed his clothes early in the morning for slacks and a sports shirt, then returned to the garden with a book which he did not read.

Only in the garden did he feel secure, as if he had some kind of grasp on life and on his own existence. Though he was quite aware that Helena was not with him, in the flesh, she was with him every other way in the garden. He did not have the illusion of hearing her voice; it was not so physical, what he felt, but he felt her presence in every particle of the air, in every blade of grass, every flower, bush, and tree.

Helena loved the garden as much as he. His thoughts were also un-

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physical—never of Helena's smile, but of her good nature, of her wonderful health that had let her ride horseback, swim, and play tennis right up to the time of her death; of her love and her care for their home, whatever and wherever it had been—a simple home at first, yet even after they had acquired a staff of servants, Helena had never stopped doing some of the cooking herself; every dinner had to have some course in it that she had prepared with her own hands.

The blonde Italian woman whose name Merrick had forgotten came out to speak to him.

"I'm quite comfortable here," Merrick said. "If I'm not bothering anyone else," he added. Certainly he was not monopolizing the glider, and frequently he walked about or sat on a rock.

She said something about his health, catching a cold, and perhaps his room was unsatisfactory.

"There's nothing wrong with my room. I simply prefer the garden," said Merrick.

Some time later it rained. Merrick sat in the glider, which had a small roof, but his feet and the lower part of his legs got soaked. He was oblivious of it, or rather he didn't mind. A garden could not forever be a garden without rain.

Two or three people ran out to speak to him during the rain, then ran back again; and when the rain stopped, five people came out, three who spoke to him and two who just stood and watched him curiously.

"I don't see that I'm bothering anyone," Merrick said. This was all he said, but even this seemed to bother them.

Finally, a single new man came out and said he was a doctor. He sat on a chair and talked gently to Merrick, but Merrick was not interested in anything the doctor had to say.

"I prefer the garden," Merrick said.

The man went away.

But Merrick knew what would happen if he enjoyed the garden much longer. So after smoking a cigarette he got up, went into the lobby, and asked for his bill. Then he sent a telegram of confirmation to the Dennises about Munich. Another bridge to cross.

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the *newest* novelet thriller by
CORNELL WOOLRICH

Cornell Woolrich's most successful stories generally fall into two categories. First, there are the stories which, to quote Anthony Boucher, have an "enormous impact of the everyday-gone-wrong"—the kindling of that anonymous, implacable horror which constantly lurks in and around the commonplaces of everyday living; and second, there are the psychological thrillers of terror and suspense that often end with a whiplash of surprise, especially when Fate intervenes. Cornell Woolrich's newest story, "Murder After Death," combines both types—with emphasis on the shocking . . .

MURDER AFTER DEATH

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

DELPHINE MARCHAND, ALTHOUGH her name was the Frenchest of the French, was the most American of Americans. She had never seen France; her scanty store of French had come out of a high school foreign-language course, and even the little there was of it was melting away from lack of use like an ice-cream cone dropped on a sizzling July sidewalk.

But her forebears had been of French origin. They were among the Huguenots (French Protestants) who had been driven out of France by Louis the Fourteenth and who first trekked numbly into Holland, and from there went on to the New World to found and settle New Rochelle, in what was still Dutch colonial territory. They were the displaced people of the Seventeenth Century.

By the time Delphine was born (the exact date: D-Day, June 6, 1944), her branch of the family had long been established at the extreme opposite end of the hospitable land-mass—in the San Francisco Bay region—and had become if not fabulously wealthy at least fruitfully so. They were winegrowers.

At the age of nineteen, a college junior, Delphine already had a three-part trust fund waiting for her: one-third payable in two years, when she became twenty-one; one-third payable when she married; and the final third payable when she became thirty. The last two were interchangeable: whichever came earlier got that particular third first.

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At the age of nineteen, a college junior, Delphine met Georg Mohler, who was studying to be a pharmacist. The coincidence of the two—Mohler and the Marchand trust fund—was not a healthful event.

Mohler's family, like Delphine's, were escapees, but there the similarity ended. There was a difference of three centuries. His people had fled Austria and the Nazis in the late Thirties. Mohler himself, although he now had his citizenship papers, had been born in the old country, and still spelled his first name in the old-country way, without the final "e".

Georg had every virtue of his sturdy peasant forebears: thrift, tenacity, ruggedness, and single-mindedness in love. He also had their one defect: thick-wittedness. They had been excellent sheepherders for generations in the Alpine foothills—which was not the best possible qualification for success in the dynamic electronic America of the Sixties.

Georg had felt three successive waves of attraction for Delphine, each one stronger than the preceding one. The first was simply attraction toward a very pretty girl, whom he certainly didn't intend to marry, but whom he intended to try to possess by any means short of marriage. The second was toward her good family background, which would be a great asset to anyone like himself. He became willing to marry her if he had to—to acquire that prestige for himself. And the third was the discovery of the tripartite trust fund which was waiting for Delphine. Now nothing *but* marrying her would satisfy him.

Naturally, Georg didn't want to marry her ahead of the trust fund and have to support her for those two intervening years. He just wanted to stake out his claim, so to speak, and then step in right along with the trust fund. California has a community property law.

At the beginning of her twentieth summer and of her third college vacation, Delphine went east to visit an aunt who lived in New York. Only a non-New Yorker would have selected New York as a place to spend the hot-weather months, but the aunt had air-conditioning and also a place out on Long Island which doubled with her city apartment as a homestead.

Georg saw her off at the airport—she was all in white except for her eyes and as beautiful as you can be only at nineteen; he kissed her and told her he'd miss her and told her he loved her and told her there'd never be anybody else but her—and a lot of other things often said at airports.

She wrote him with ardent frequency at first, almost at the rate of a letter a day. She was enchanted with New York—it was the first time she had been there—and with the people of her own age whom she met through her aunt.

But as June became July, the

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letters began to falter. Georg smiled indulgently. He wasn't worried; they had too good an understanding. Let her have her little fling.

Then from twice a week the letters dropped to once a week, then to once in two weeks. The last one casually mentioned a young Mr. Reed Newcomb she had met at a dinner party that her aunt had arranged for her.

Then the letters stopped dead.

Georg became uneasy. His inherent European thrift didn't like the idea of that sizable trust fund—which by now he considered his own—getting away from him. Equally, or almost so, his masculine pride didn't like the idea of anyone getting Delphine away from him.

He called her up long-distance at her aunt's apartment, which was on Lexington Avenue in the Murray Hill district. He hated to have to do it—his ingrained peasant frugality; but this was not a time to count pennies.

She was noncommittal about almost everything—noncommittal about when she was coming back, noncommittal about young Reed Newcomb, and noncommittal about whether she still felt the same toward Georg.

Hanging up, he knew he'd lost her—or would if he didn't do something about it quickly.

So on the first of August he started out on the long four-day, three-night train trip to the Eastern Seaboard, bent on protecting what he considered his vested rights in Delphine's trust fund. He went by train because he was afraid of planes, even though flying was a time-saver.

His train arrived at Grand Central early in the morning, about nine, but that didn't deter him. He called Delphine's aunt's apartment right from the station.

The aunt, who knew of him through her sister, told him Delphine was no longer staying with her. She had moved out and taken a small apartment of her own a few weeks before. The aunt sounded hurt about this, but she obligingly supplied Georg with the address.

Uneasiness had now become alarm. He hadn't arrived on the scene a minute too soon, he thought. Living alone like that, away from her aunt's supervision, meant that the coast was now entirely clear for Reed Newcomb.

Georg went over there immediately, to have a showdown and to extend his option, not even taking time to check into a hotel; he simply deposited his suitcase in a locker. It was still before ten in the morning, but he didn't let that stop him.

She didn't have her name in the bell-slot yet—either she hadn't had time in the rush of moving in or she had overlooked it. But he was able to figure it out easily enough: it was the only blank slot, and none of the other names were hers. So he pushed the button, the door opened

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by remote control, and he rode up in a coffin-sized self-service elevator. When he recalled this later, it struck him as an omen.

Again he rang, this time upstairs, and the door opened and Delphine stood there. She looked very sleepy and disheveled, and not at all enthusiastic at seeing him. She was wearing a silk wrap-around over a nightgown.

"Georg!" she whispered. At first he thought surprise had robbed her of her voice.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered. "How did you know where I was?"

"Your aunt told me." His voice sounded loud, in contrast to hers.

"You never said a word about coming to New York." Her voice was still a whisper. The expression on her face seemed to indicate that her surprise wasn't exactly a pleasant one.

"You stopped writing, so what else was I to do?" Again his voice sounded unnaturally loud because of the softness of hers.

This time she said, "Sh!"—cautioningly.

"Why 'Sh'?" he wanted to know.

For a moment he thought she didn't want any of the neighbors to see her standing in the doorway dressed like that and talking to a strange young man.

"Aren't you going to ask me to come in?" he said finally.

"Georg, I can't under the circumstances—"

"Well, that's great, after I've come three thousand miles!"

"You had no right to come here like this without giving me warning."

His suspicions now fully activated, he deliberately pushed the door back, pushed past her, and went in.

It was a small one-room apartment, with an even smaller sleeping alcove attached to it.

Almost the first thing Georg saw, once he was inside, was the rumpled bed in the alcove. And in the rumpled bed, wearing pajamas and sound asleep, was a crew-cutted young man—by inference Reed Newcomb.

Georg's face went as white as if he'd seen a ghost.

Delphine tactfully drew a hanging of some sort across the alcove, but it was too late.

"No wonder you didn't want me to come in 'under the circumstances'," he said bitterly. "No wonder you left your aunt's. No wonder you stopped writing. And how long has this been going on?"

"Look, I won't have a scandal here," Delphine told him firmly. "Either keep your voice down or leave."

"Does your aunt know about this?"

"Nobody does," she told him. "Only you, and if you hadn't come around here prying, even you wouldn't have found out. It's my own business and nobody has any ri—"

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"Get him out of here," Georg ordered roughly, "or I'll do it myself."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Delphine flamed. "He's my husband. We were married three weeks ago, and he has more right here than you have."

Georg was so stunned he couldn't stand on his feet; he had to fall back into a chair, and he looked so close to collapse that she actually ran and got him a glass of water.

It was all over now. Goodbye to the trust fund and all the plans he'd made for buying a little pharmacy of his own. All finished, all washed up.

He sat there dejectedly, his head so low it was almost between his legs.

"Do your parents know?"

"No," she said. "Reed and I decided to keep it to ourselves for a while. I have one more year of college to finish, first. I'm going back in September. And Reed has his law school." Then she added anxiously, "You won't tell them when you go back, will you, Georg? Please don't. Please do this one last favor for me."

"I won't," Georg said dully. But he decided privately that if he found it at all serviceable as a weapno, he certainly would tell them.

There was no use staying after that. She showed quite plainly that she considered him to be in the way. So he got up, they shook hands coolly, and he left.

Thus Delphine's husband and her former fiance did not meet eye to eye at that particular time, even though one of them glimpsed the other sleeping. The two most important men in her life. But two men is always one man too many, in any life, at any time.

Delphine Marchand, now Delphine Newcomb, never came back to the California that had bred her. She never came back to finish that final year of college which had been the reason for her keeping her marriage a secret . . .

Georg's phone rang one Sunday afternoon. It wasn't even his phone; he lived in a rooming house, so it was the rooming-house phone. But the call was for him and an anonymous voice yelled: "Anybody named Mohler up there?" (He thought afterward, "What a way to be told—love is over, happiness is over.")

He put down the whiskey shotglass that hadn't helped him to stop thinking about her.

A woman was crying at the other end.

He couldn't recognize her by the tears, but then when she spoke brokenly through them, he recognized her by the words: Flora Marchand, Delphine's mother.

"Georg," was all she could say at first. "Georg. You were so close to her. I had to call you. You were so close to her."

"What is it?" First he thought: they've found out about the marriage. It's broken them up. Maybe

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I still have a chance. Maybe they'll annul it. She's still under age. Maybe they'll at least contest Newcomb's coming into the trust fund.

Georg's heart put on a smile. "What is it?"

"Georg. It's Delphine. She's gone."

She'd run away from them, was hiding from them. "Disappeared?"

"Not disappeared. Don't you understand me? She's dead. She died early this morning in New York."

The news was like a form of death itself. He seemed to go down into deep water, slowly, like a diver in deep-sea apparatus, sinking to the bottom while the light around him gradually darkened, just as it would in deepening water, from glowing green to indigo-blue to rayless black.

Then, at the very depths, the thought came to him: *He did it. It was his doing.*

But the mother's voice, reaching him meanwhile like a message coming down through a diver's lifeline, was saying, ". . . natural causes. The young and healthy are so careless. A terrible thought occurred to us at first. She left a letter written just before she died revealing her marriage to this man. When we heard about it we naturally suspected the worst—but the medical examiner's report was read to us over the phone, and we spoke to the doctor who attended her at the end. Simple neglect. They went swimming at one of the places around there—Jones Beach. She caught a chill. The chill turned into a light cold. The light cold turned into a heavy one. But she was young and newly married, so she couldn't be bothered nursing herself. Suddenly her resistance collapsed, and it was too late to do anything to save her. She died of bronchial pneumonia and complications."

He struggled slowly upward again, back to the surface of life—of a life that was simply vengeance now, not love any more.

Then I'll say he did it. I'll accuse him of it. I'll do more than accuse. I'll make it stick. I'll fasten it on him so tightly that he'll never be able to free himself of it.

I'll make him die for it.

The room she lay in was a nuclear fission of flowers. Its walls were completely hidden by them. Only its ceiling was visible and that part of the floor where two lanes had been left clear, for people to come and go. Flowers of every kind were there, flowers of every color. All but one. There were white flowers, pink flowers, yellow flowers, lavender, blue, even bronze. All but red—for red is unbecoming to death.

And in the middle of them all she lay, so quiet, so inscrutable. Like a madonna with downcast, alabaster eyelids in a medieval painting. If she had been beautiful in life, she was transcendent in death. The four tall tapers at the corners of the bier were like topaz prayers

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for her soul going steadily, tirelessly upward.

Georg came and stood in the doorway, with the attaché case hanging from one hand, A case such as anyone is apt to use nowadays when he travels on a train or on a plane and doesn't want to carry too much with him.

Two small gilt caneback chairs were drawn up side by side facing the catafalque. On them sat two anonymous, black-garbed, heavily veiled figures, much like the dead come to mourn the dead. He could only tell they were alive by the slight puckering which their indrawn breaths made in the thickly meshed veiling. That and the occasional dab that a black-gloved hand, clenching a black bordered handkerchief, made toward an unattainable eye or mouth. Unattainable because the veiling screened them off.

He could tell they were women because their black garb fell circularly around them to the floor. And lastly, by a process of elimination, he could tell they were Delphine's mother, Flora Marchand, and Delphine's aunt. The man standing behind them was Delphine's father. Men do not veil their faces to mourn their dead, and Georg had met him on a number of occasions.

These three made up her entire immediate family.

Georg unobtrusively placed the attaché case behind a lavish floral design mounted on an easel and came softly forward to join them.

Mr. Marchand shook hands gravely with him, and then tapped the women on their shoulders to attract their attention. Delphine's mother turned and placed her own hand on top of the one Georg had resting on the back of her chair, and patted it in shared grief and mournful affection. Georg bent down and kissed the back of her hand, as one who had so nearly become her fond son-in-law. The aunt gave a subdued sniffle deep within the recesses of her black goblin's-head.

Georg straightened, stepped back a pace, and then stood motionless alongside the father, his hands clasped in back of him at times, in front of him at other times, folded over his chest at still others, but never at any time in his pockets.

For nearly an hour the little quartet kept its vigil, while nothing seemed to move except an occasional flicker or undulation of the livid flame-tips.

At last Delphine's father bent forward and whispered solicitously to her mother, "You'd better let me take you back to your sister's now, dear. You must get some rest. You have a trying day ahead of you tomorrow."

This was what Georg had been waiting for. He leaned over her opposite shoulder and murmured reassuringly, "I'll remain here in your place, Mrs. Marchand, I'll remain here until the last moment, until they close for the night. She won't be left alone."

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The two women rose stiffly, and the man led them painfully toward the door, like two scarecrows in fluttering black rags.

Georg removed one chair, and sat down on the second one, with a groan for finally relaxed limbs. He took out a cigarette and held it tentatively in his hand, then decided against it and put it away.

He had loved her in his fashion, had respected her in his fashion. What he had come here to do was not against her; it was against the man who had snatched her from him, and then, like a clumsy fool, had not known how to guard, how to cherish, his precious acquisition, but had dropped it, let it fall through his fingers, so that it was smashed, irrevocably destroyed, never to be put together again.

He had to pay for that. He had to be punished. And he was going to be.

Delphine's aunt had had her chauffeur and limousine waiting for her downstairs in front of the funeral chapel; Georg had seen them when he came in. The chauffeur was an attentive man who had been her driver for years; it was almost certain that when he saw her on the point of leaving he would come forward into the building's vestibule or entranceway to assist her out to the car and relieve Delphine's father of his double duty. Thus at a quick glance, if the director should happen to look out of his private office, four people would seem to be leaving—the same number that had been upstairs.

Georg kept consulting his watch at pulse-beat intervals. When it was exactly a quarter to ten, he got up, put his chair back with the other one, and picked up the attaché case from its place of safekeeping. He found a corner where the floral tributes were a veritable thicket. Then it was the easiest thing in the world for Georg to insinuate himself into this from the rear, by flattening himself along the wall, and once within it to squat down on his heels and become completely invisible.

He waited with the terrible patience that only vindictiveness knows, feeling no strain, no fatigue, from his awkward position. He was as patient as a blowgun savage waiting in an Amazonian jungle for his prey to come within range.

The closing hour came at last. There was the sibilance of an ascending tread on the thick-carpeted staircase outside, and then somebody came into the room. Georg couldn't hear him come in, but knew he had, because the ascending *schuh-schuh* had stopped.

The attendant must have stood there in the entrance, looking around, seeing nothing but the two discarded little gilt chairs. Georg couldn't see him, but far more important, he couldn't see Georg.

Georg didn't hear him move into the center of the room—he walked so velvety—but the light changed

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in a way difficult to describe; there wasn't any less of it, but its texture became different, colder and less personal; and Georg knew the attendant had snuffed out the ritual tapers. A moment later the scent of singed cord drifted past Georg's nostrils and quickly vanished.

Now the attendant went back to the entrance again. Still no hint of footfalls—but a fern or flower spray hissed a little at his passage, then sighed back into place again. The light switch snapped like a child's cap pistol, exaggerated by the unnatural stillness, and the world and everyone in it, living and dead, turned a deep sapphire-blue—the blue of midnight and of caves and of ocean depths.

The purring tread went down the stairs, to where it had come from. Another light switch clicked, this time far more faintly than the first. The stairs and upper hall went dark, but Georg only guessed it—he couldn't have told the difference where he was.

Someone's voice said to someone else, "Everybody's out."

He could hear windows being fastened. An air conditioner whirred to a stop. A desk drawer cracked closed. A man's voice entered into a brief conversation—evidently over a phone; most likely the man was calling his home to say that he was leaving now.

Meanwhile, somewhere to the back, a door opened, the sound rising sharply. Then the door closed, and the sound died.

"Ready?" a voice said.

"All set," another voice answered.

A final light switch clicked. The front door opened. The front door closed. Then the front door was locked from the outside.

A car engine came to life out in the street in front of the funeral parlor. It quickened, pulled away, and was lost in the distance.

Georg was alone with the dead.

The halo or disk cast by his pocket flashlight was like a low-lying blue-white moon peering weirdly through a matted jungle. A cannibal-moon, a headhunters'-moon, a moon of the pygmies, its rays falling on gardenias and orchids—and boa-constrictors and piranha.

He perched it on a corner of the casket so that the moon shone full into her face. She slept on undisturbed, her eyelids never flickering in its dazzle.

Overcome for a moment by the memory of love, and by the too-realistic image of the one he had once loved, Georg leaned over and kissed her.

Then he drew back sharply, almost in a recoil.

It was like kissing cold, hardened wax.

He took the hypodermic needle out of the attaché case and held it for a moment against the light to make doubly sure that it was ready—though it was, it had to be, for he had readied it himself.

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Then he turned back the white satin quilt that covered her shoulders. It was cross-stitched in silver, in a diamond-shaped pattern.

He inserted one hand into the casket. With this hand he steadied the point of the hypodermic.

The other hand, on the outside, moved forward to press the plunger . . .

Georg traced Reed to a room in a midtown hotel where Newcomb had gone simply to ride out his grief—or else go down under it—after finding it impossible to remain in the tiny apartment that had been his and Delphine's.

The first time Georg asked for him at the desk, Reed was out. This was around eight the next evening.

"You don't know when he'll be back?" Georg asked.

"No, I don't," the desk man answered.

Georg decided to wait right there for him, rather than go away and have to come back later. He went over and sat down in one of the lounge chairs.

His only glimpse of Reed had been of a close-cropped head sleeping in Delphine's bed, and this type of shorn hair was anything but rare among contemporary young men; but something told Georg that he'd know him when he came in, and he did.

The shoulders were slumped dejectedly; the walk was desultory and listless. Misery had put out the shine in his eyes. and he had a cylindrical package under one arm that was obviously a bottle.

The clerk confirmed the recognition by pointing to Georg, and Reed turned around, looked, then came over toward him questioningly.

Georg donned the forthright, unpretentious attitude that he could assume whenever it suited his pose. He rose and extended his hand. "My name's Mohler. I used to be a friend of Delphine's. We were schoolmates. I looked you up because—well, each of us was close to her in our own way."

Reed stood looking at him intently for a long moment without saying anything. Georg tried to translate the look. Suspicion? Doubt? Resentment? No, none of those. Then he got it. The man was dazed with his grief, stunned with suffering.

I'll put you out of your pain, Georg vowed to himself.

Reed sat down abruptly, as abruptly as though his legs had given way under him.

Even his reflexes are shot, Georg thought. How easy this is going to be.

"Let me buy you a drink," he said softly. "What hurts most, hurts a little less with a drink."

"I have it right here," Reed said, "Come on up to my room."

Which was exactly what Georg had hoped for and wanted—but he hadn't dreamed it would come about so easily.

They went upstairs to the room.

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Reed took off his coat and tie, Georg just his coat. Reed disheveled the vivid-green wrapping paper from around the bottle. Georg set his attaché case on the floor, upright against his chair.

The wake began—and it was a wake in every sense of the word. A lament for the dead. A valedictory for those soon to die.

The fiancé and the husband mourning the same woman.

Delphine. Delphine. Their voices brought her before them again, brought her back. In a yellow dress and a wide white hat she moved softly about their chairs. Now she placed her hand tenderly on Georg's shoulder, in old-time friendship. Now she bent down and pressed her cheek caressingly against Reed's in old-time love. Even her perfume was in the room—muguet, lily of the valley . . .

Suddenly Reed collapsed into his own lap, his face buried, his arms entwining it. His glass fell and rolled. The inch of taffy-colored residue it had held made a star-shaped puddle on the carpet, some of its rays longer than others.

His shoulders started to jitter ever so lightly, no more than when the skin crawls as it is being tickled with a feather or when a small insect walks across it. He held back even the smallest sob.

He didn't want the other man to see, to hear, to watch him. He got up stumblingly, face turned away, and went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He turned on the water of the shower, and above its drumming came a sound like someone having a bad coughing spell.

Now the time for revenge had come.

There was a three-tiered dresser in the room, with two oblong drawers and two small square ones above them. Georg opened one of the latter and looked in. It held socks, handkerchiefs, and similar items of smaller personal linen. He closed it in rejection; it was too likely that Reed would go to it at least once a day to take out a fresh handkerchief.

The other small square drawer held a mare's-nest of neckties, not a single one of them folded the way it should have been. This was more to Georg's purpose. A man in Reed's present state of mind was not likely to bother about changing his necktie.

Georg unlatched the attaché case, took out two objects wrapped in newspaper, one rounded, the other thin but elongated. He placed them for a moment on the bureau, then pulled the mass of neckties to the front of the drawer so that a vacant space was left in the rear.

He considered a moment, then made up his mind and unwrapped the two objects. One was revealed as a sizable bottle holding a colorless liquid. It was labeled: *Ouabaine—0.25 mg.* The second was simply an ordinary hypodermic needle.

He put them both in, spread out the neckties, and closed the drawer.

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A moment later the shower in the bathroom stopped as abruptly as if it had been cut off by a switch.

Document A (block-printed on ruled yellow paper, postmarked Ansonia Station, New York City):

Mrs. Flora Marchand,
Berkeley, Calif.

I am sorry if I add to your already overwellming (crossed out) great grief, but I must tell you that the death of your daughter was not from natural causes. It was brought about by an overdose of liquid digitalis, medically known as ouabaine. It was administrated (crossed out) given by hypodermic into the abdomidal (crossed out) stomach cavity, I lived in the same house with them and am in a position to know what I am saying.

A crime like this should not go unpunished. The truth will out.

An Honest Man

Document B (also on ruled yellow paper, but typed; postmarked Times Square Station, New York City):

To the Office of the Medical Examiner,
Department of Police, City of New York
Dear Sir or Sirs:

The death of Mrs. Delphine Newcomb on September 15 last was not due to natural causes, in spite of your findings. A reexamination will prove that ouabaine was administrated (crossed out) given past the tolerance level with intention to kill.

I can't understand how you missed finding this. It is your duty to reveal such a murder. You are supposed to be the protectors of the public.

An Honest Citizen

A turning point now came into Georg's campaign.

He was sure that exhumation had been carried out and the autopsy performed. A sufficient time had now elapsed since he had mailed the letters. But his reason for being sure involved one factor only. Not the Medical Examiner's office, not the police. They might or might not have believed his denunciation. Most likely they had not. They probably considered the letter the work of a crank and had simply pigeonholed it.

But there was Flora Marchand. He knew her well, and knew he could count on her. This increase to her already insupportable grief would force her to investigate, would give her no rest until she had. She probably hoped the charge was unfounded, but she would be bitterly determined to make sure. Besides, she was already receptive—the ground had been prepared for him. He had remembered her remark on the phone: "A terrible thought occurred to us at first . . . her marriage to this man . . . we suspected the worst."

Suspicion hadn't died—it had only been allayed. His letter would rekindle it—into a flaming actuality. She would be his *dea ex machina*.

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She would force the thing through. And it was from her, from the dead girl's family, that the impetus should come. The police and the M.E.'s office, satisfied with their own documentation, could only be triggered into action by the family of the deceased.

Georg was now avid to have Reed punished. It was a veritable thirst, far worse than any bodily thirst he had ever known. A blood-thirst, in every sense of the word. He wasn't content merely to sit back and let events take their course. There was always a possibility that Reed might be able to talk his way out of the trap. In this respect, the original M.E.'s report was a big point in his favor, and one that Georg could never eliminate. He could only hope, at best, to minimize it.

Thus Georg, having done all he could to incriminate Reed but deeply aware of the uncertainties still remaining, decided that Reed must also be made to incriminate himself. This would double his jeopardy, compound the suspicion cast on him. And the only way to have Reed incriminate himself was to frighten him into running away. The innocent sometimes lost their heads just as much as the guilty, Georg well knew. And the only way to frighten Reed into bolting was to tip him off, warn him of what was coming.

There was a risk here of destroying the very thing he had so painstakingly brought about, but Georg decided the advantages outweighed the dangers. Even if Reed stood his ground, foreknowledge might very well shatter his self-possession, make him appear guilty that much more.

The thing unfolded beautifully in its opening stages.

Georg called the hotel, and Reed answered from his room. This was about 8:30 in the morning.

"There's something urgent I've got to talk to you about—" Georg began.

"If you'd called five minutes later," Reed told him, "you'd have missed me. I just finished packing. I'm chucking law school. I have my ticket in my pocket, and I'm taking the nine o'clock train to the Coast."

Georg couldn't believe his ears. This was perfect. It couldn't have been any better if he'd planned it that way. Reed's bag packed, his train ticket in his pocket. All the appearances of running away.

But Georg still wasn't satisfied—he had to give Reed the *coup de grâce.*

"But you've got to listen to this," Georg insisted. "This is something you've got to hear."

"I don't want to hear anything. I've lost Delphine and that's all I care about."

"This concerns her," Georg said artfully.

That brought him up short.

"The body's been exhumed and they'll be around to question you at any moment. Poison was found in it."

The choking sound Reed made

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came clearly across the wire.

"What kind of poison?" he said finally.

"Ouabaine, better known as liquid digitalis. Point twenty-five milligrams is the normal dosage given in heart cases. Point fifty would be dangerous, and seventy-five deadly."

"I found some right here in the r— " Reed started to say, then he changed his mind. Instead he asked, "How do you happen to know about it?"

"I have a friend in the M.E.'s office—a stenographer. She tipped me off that they're going to pick you up, and I thought the least I could do was warn you."

He waited a moment, to let the thing percolate through Reed's mind. Then he asked cagily, "Are you still going away?"

"Yes," Reed answered on a despairing note that was almost like a moan. He hung up abruptly without saying goodbye.

There was a burning light in Georg's eyes as he quitted the phone. He flung himself backward against the wall, arms outspread and legs wide apart so that his body formed an approximation of the letter X. His face straining upward and his body shuddering so that he trembled from head to foot, he cried out in his own seldom-used tongue.

Standing across the street facing the hotel entrance, Georg took up his vigil. He wanted the satisfaction of seeing his enemy flee and bring about his own downfall. The minute hand of his watch toiled slowly toward nine.

Georg shifted weight expectantly. What was holding Reed up? He had said he was all packed. In a few more minutes he was going to be late for his train.

Georg walked as far as the near corner. He could still see the entrance from there perfectly. He saw a garish orange-and-red taxicab draw up to the entrance, and for a moment he thought Reed had sent for it. But a man on crutches came out of the hotel and was helped into the cab by the doorman.

Now Georg had crossed over to the matching corner on the hotel side. He lit a cigarette, threw it away. It was 8:50. Then it was 8:51. He took out another cigarette, didn't light it, threw that one away too.

Suddenly, without realizing that he had moved at all, Georg was outside the hotel entrance itself. It was 8:55. Reed had missed the train. Had he decided to take a later one, or had he changed his mind altogether?

Irresistibly as a nail is drawn to a magnet, Georg went inside.

Reed's bag, packed and ready to go, was standing in the hall outside his room door. He must have gone back inside for something at the last minute. Georg waited, watch-

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ing, but when Reed didn't come out, Georg approached the door and tapped lightly.

No answer.

He tried it. The door had been left unlocked. Georg looked in.

The first thing he saw was Reed lying on the bed, as normally and composedly as if he'd lain down to rest for a moment before going to the train, and had inadvertently dozed off. One arm was bent across his eyes, as if to shield them from the bright morning light streaming in through the open window.

He was fully clothed, except for his jacket, and he'd loosened his tie into a slipknot. One shirt sleeve had been pushed far up, almost to his shoulder, and the telltale hypodermic lay on the bed, alongside that arm. The bottle was on the night-stand beside the bed.

Georg put his hand on the inert wrist. The body was still warm, but the pulse had stopped. He must have only just died, while Georg was waiting outside on the street.

The note was on the table. It said briefly:

They tell me there are other girls. They lie. Somebody told me about this stuff. I'm going to try it myself. Here goes nothing at all—to nowhere at all on a one-way ticket. Give the money in my wallet to the cleaning woman. She's a kind old lady. Give my watch to the elevator man. I've seen him admiring it. Throw the rest of me out with the litter.

Georg's first impulse was to fold it and put it away in his pocket for safekeeping. Then he realized that if it should ever become necessary to produce it, he'd be revealing his visit to Reed's room. So he put it back where he'd found it.

He was bitterly disappointed. His triumph had been cut in half. True, Reed was dead, as Georg had wanted him to be. But not in the way he had wanted. Reed had escaped the months of long-drawn-out confinement, the final branding as a murderer in the eyes of the world, and the ultimate horrors of a legalized execution that Georg had wanted Reed to experience.

He returned to where the body lay, picked up the hypodermic, and eyed it almost accusingly, as if it were something animate that had betrayed him of its own will.

Neither of the two men in the doorway had spoken or moved, but suddenly Georg knew someone was standing there and his head snapped around. The hypo fell on top of Reed's body.

They came all the way in then, giving the door a great swing-around that funneled a draft into the room and sent the curtains leaping out the open window.

Nothing was said. It was like something being acted out in grim and deadly pantomime. One of them took a twist on Georg's coatsleeve, gripped him by the slack of the coat collar, and held him pinned that way. The other one examined Reed,

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drew up one of his dead eyelids, then turned around and nodded with his mouth pressed tight, He lined his hand with a handkerchief and picked up the hypodermic in it.

Georg broke the unbearable silence at last, before they did. He couldn't hold out.

"I found him like this when I came in the room just now. He did it himself. There's a note on the table that will tell you—"

The three of them turned to look. There was no note to be seen on the table, nor on the floor, nor anywhere else in the room.

Georg's body gave a heave of dismay, and then sank back. He would have collapsed if the man hadn't been holding him so tight.

"It must have blown out the window when you opened the door!" he cried out hoarsely. "Send someone down after it, quick! For God's sake, send someone down to look for it!"

"We will," one of them said stonily. "You can be sure of that." He went to the phone, probably to call downstairs to a patrolman who had been posted outside the hotel entrance.

Cold sweat broke out along Georg's hairline. He was visualizing those hundreds of heedless feet trudging and scuffing the sidewalks down there. Those numberless drainage sewers, those countless basement grates. Those acres and acres of rooftops—yes, even in New York there are many rooftops that are comparatively low—with the wind blowing free across them.

Somehow he knew . . .

"For a student pharmacist," the one gripping him said, "you're a very stupid man. Didn't you realize that the circulation stops as soon as death occurs? Nothing moves any longer, nothing is carried by it. The whole injection was found at the point of entry, Why, *even the small puncture in the skin made by the needle hadn't closed up, as it would have in living tissue.* The whole thing was a dead giveaway,"

"I admit nothing," Georg scowled with his characteristic peasant obstinacy. "But still and all, suppose for the sake of argument this is so, that the body was already dead when someone injected a poisonous substance into it. Then what could you hold him on? Surely not murder."

"We're not acting on that case," the man said. "*This* is the case we're acting on—this one right here. Everything depends on how this needle and this bottle of liquid check out. And they should be easier to trace than a gun. If it turns out this man bought them himself, then you have nothing to worry about. But if it turns out *you* were the one who bought them, or got hold of them in some way, then we have our case made."

Georg stepped through the open doorway between the two of them, the glaze of oncoming doom already in his eyes.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 271st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Again we cannot refrain from quoting readers' reports of this most unusual "first story." Again the same phrases kept turning up: "poignancy" and "sensitive writing" and "memorable" . . .

The author was 26 when she wrote "The Last Concert." She was born in Wichita, Kansas, and raised in Pueblo, Colorado. She played violin with the symphony orchestra in her home town (as does the narrator in her "first story"), and later studied art at the University of Denver. In college: women's varsity rifle team (she won the women's national rifle championship in 1956) and during summer vacations, attendant in a mental hospital. After college: travel in Europe, then to Anchorage, Alaska, where she met her husband. For the past few years: art teacher in junior high school and in Anchorage Community College. Spare time: photography, building a triple-hulled sailboat—and now, writing . . .

We are sure that all of you will want to read more of Linda Villesvik's work—and soon!

THE LAST CONCERT

by LINDA VILLESVIK

I WAS A SHY, SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD girl when it happened. That was ten years ago, in a place I will call Lafayette. No court could prosecute; but even after ten years, it still preys on my conscience . . .

Lafayette is a big steel town. It sits on the edge of the prairie, hot and dusty in the summertime, cold and dusty in the winter, dominated by a platoon of stark rusted chimneys across the river. Lafayette had a steel town's inevitable bad reputation. To overcome this, certain elements in the town deliberately forced Lafayette into a determined mold as a cultural center—the dry Athens of the Great Plains—and tried to overlook the tavern brawls and dingy rows of houses over by the mill.

Ladies' Clubs reviewed books they pretended to understand, and pseudo-eggheads argued over obscure slivers of philosophy. The Art Museum—endowed by the steel baron's son—housed sweet landscapes and gentle clusters of animal heads, all very photographic and safe. The two Community Theaters

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overacted Shakespeare to full audiences, but the Lafayette Ballet Troupe was mostly boycotted—men cavorting in tights were considered immoral by the cultured.

Finally, there was the Lafayette Civic Symphony.

The symphony orchestra was the oldest of Lafayette's cultural institutions, and the citizens were the proudest of it. Every month in the Memorial Hall there was a concert made up of light classics, inoffensive and easily recognized. Mr. Rafallo Collodi directed the orchestra, a dry old man who lived with a niece who repaired violins. He conducted stiffly, his back rigid as though age had fused his vertebrae, his elbows seldom leaving his waist.

The town had canonized Mr. Collodi ("the grand old man of music," the Lafayette *Star-Journal* styled him) because he'd conducted the orchestra for so many decades. He looked like a gray board, dressed up in an old-fashioned swallowtail coat that was beginning to shine at the shoulders. When he bowed, he bowed gingerly, as though he were afraid he might break himself.

I attended all the concerts with my mother and envied the musicians in their ascetic black sitting below the conductor. They were a separate elite group—like the Praetorian Guards of Rome—and more than anything I wanted to be a part of that noble clique.

That was why I scraped out the Kreutzer études on my violin and made the pilgrimage every Wednesday to Mr. Malloy's for my lesson. In my mind I was preparing myself to be a part of the symphony orchestra, though a stubborn pride kept me from ever mentioning this to Mr. Malloy. But Mr. Malloy mentioned it to me one Wednesday in September after I had thoroughly depressed him with my rendition of *Hejri Kati*.

We were in the studio that he had made over from his spare bedroom. The walls were lined with untidy brick-and-board shelves, sagging under the weight of books and record albums. I was loosening my bow, vowing that I'd startle him with a really good lesson next week. Mr. Malloy had tipped his chair back until it rested against the jumble of books and sheet music behind him and idly slipped a record album from the shelf.

"Thought of going out for the symphony this year, Jeannie?"

I stopped unscrewing the bow. "I don't know. Do you think—I could make it?"

"Probably." He spoke with authority, I knew; he sat in the second chair, right next to the concertmaster. He set the record album on his lap and when he spoke again, he seemed to be addressing the photograph of Gregor Lipescu on the cover rather than me. "Collodi's leaving this year, you know."

I didn't know. I wasted time, putting the bow away. The man was

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maddeningly slow when I was so breathless to hear more.

"He's retiring. He's eighty-four."

"I didn't know that." I closed the case and pretended to have trouble with the latches. "Who's going to take his place?"

"Walter Rossen." He rolled the name out slowly, as though tasting it, and hooked his hands behind his fuzzy bush of hair. "Supposed to be a real crackerjack. Studied at Juilliard, taught there later. Won a Guggenheim one year. Guess he'll be teaching something at the junior college, too. He's from Denver. Anyway, the tryouts will be over at the college if you're interested. Seven thirty, next Tuesday."

I paid him, went to the bus stop in a pink cloud, and remembered nothing of my ride home.

The rosiness soon dissolved in apprehension; for, despite Mr. Malloy's lazy assurance, I might not pass the tryouts. And I dreaded facing the auditions alone.

On Monday I discovered that Dorothy Fonsecca, the high school orchestra's concertmistress, was going to try out, too. Dorothy was a better violinist than I was and sometimes she played for school assemblies. I had never played in public unless one counts my mother's doting demands to play for remarkably tolerant guests. After I had ingratiated myself with Dorothy by giving her a candy bar, she suggested that we go to the tryouts together, and I breathed easier.

On Tuesday evening she picked me up in her father's car a little before 7:00, because the junior college was across town. When we pulled into the college parking lot, there was a dishearteningly large number of cars already there. We crossed the still-warm asphalt to the square squat building sitting a little apart from the rest of the campus.

We opened the door and went in. The noise from dozens of instruments was ear-splitting. If Dorothy hadn't been with me, I would have run away out of sheer cowardice. Folding chairs and music stands were tightly packed in a neat semicircle, all the way to the staff-lined chalkboards in back.

More than half of the chairs were already filled by people rosining bows, sucking on reeds, or blowing themselves a happy puckered red on trumpets. Mr. Malloy sat next to the concertmaster and he flicked me a little wink before he ripped a magnificent chord from his violin.

A small wooden podium stood at the front of the room, like the hub of an incomplete wheel. On it a thick little man sat on a stool in front of a flat-tilted music stand. He had tousled hair that looked as though he made a habit of raking his fingers through it. Walter Rossen, I thought. I grew a protective numbness inside me, and everything felt a little unreal.

Mr. Rossen almost glanced in our

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direction. "Take a seat," he said, rapid as gunfire, and waved his hand. "Anywhere."

I followed Dorothy, mincing apologetically past furiously bowing arms, to two seats next to each other at the back of the second violin section (it would have been presumptuous to sit closer) and took out my violin. When the clock over the door inched past 7:30, Mr. Rossen stepped off the stool. He had the flabby sort of thick-waisted body that could never become either tanned or muscled. His face was as nondescript as putty except for two deep grooves from nose wings to lips that appeared and vanished as he spoke. That face seemed to rise as an extension of his thick rubbery neck, as though the jaw had been forgotten.

"I am gratified at the large turnout for the auditions," he said in a somewhat hoarse voice, "and so that we can get them over with without delay, I'm going to refrain from making a speech. Now, you're all competent musicians or you wouldn't be here, and believe me, I wish I could use all of you. First of all, I'm Walter Rossen, and we already have a concertmaster, Mister Czerny—" (Mr. Czerny, in his thirties but with the mien of an old man, tokenly pushed himself a few inches from his chair)—"and a principal second, Mister Matthews. Now Dave, please pass out the Smetana."

Mr. Matthews, a youngish man with black-rimmed glasses and a luxurious clump of hair on his chin, was sitting at the front of the second section; he scooped an armful of music from under his chair and hurried through the orchestra, thumping pages onto stands. It was the *Dance of the Comedians* and I withered because it was quite, quite beyond me. All I could hope was that I wouldn't be the worst one there.

The tryouts began. Hopefuls and veterans alike were required to stand in turn, give their names, which Mr. Rossen wrote down, then sight-read assigned passages in the Smetana. The solo violins sounded dim and I lost all sense of time. Two elderly ladies wallowed through a passage, then came Dorothy. She played poorly—her fingering and bowing were not together—and sat down with a shudder.

"Thank you." Mr. Rossen wrote something on the paper. "Next?"

I stood up. When I gave my name I stammered so badly that I had to repeat it twice. I was assigned a few bars and felt strangely relaxed, because I was so certain to fail. When I drew the bow across the strings, I seemed to hear another violin, muffled as though playing from under a fathom of water.

"Thank you. Next, please?"

Was it too bad? I wanted to ask Dorothy, but a pout-lipped pride stopped me. My hands were shaking and I knitted them together to hide the tremor . . .

The tryouts ended past 11:00. After the last horn bumbled through its

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assigned measures, everyone sat in expectant silence while Mr. Rossen scowled and scribbled, whispered to Mr. Czerny, and then scowled some more. I yawned elaborately and told myself I was bored with it all.

After a while Mr. Rossen looked up and smoothed the scowl from his face. "I will be as brief as I can," he said. "Next to Mister Czerny, Mister Bradshaw. Second stand, first violins, Mister Malloy. Next to him . . ." And so on, in a near monotone. I lounged back and tried to figure out how the light fixtures in the ceiling were put together. The folding chairs clattered dimly as people changed places.

"Seconds, next to Mister Matthews, Misses Keefer and . . ." I yawned some more and also convinced myself that the wateriness in my eyes was due to the yawning. "Eighth stand, Miss Fonsecca." How nice, I thought sarcastically. Dorothy glanced up, her face stony and startled, and went to the assigned chair. "Beside her, Miss Darby."

That was me! Suddenly weightless, I almost knocked over two stands sliding past the trombonist and flopping beside Dorothy. I was in the very last seat in the second violin section—but I was in!

I rode with Dorothy to the first rehearsal next Tuesday. While I over-rosined my bow, Dave Matthews passed out contracts — brief statements saying that we would, barring any God-sent catastrophe, remain with the Lafayette Civic Symphony all season for the munificent salary of $3 per performance. After Dave collected them and rushed them to the podium, Mr. Rossen made a short speech.

"I am glad that you are here on time. Rehearsals start promptly — I repeat promptly—at seven thirty. That means you are to be tuned up by that time. On the Thursday before each concert, there will be an additional rehearsal at the Memorial Hall."

He pulled his fingers through the creases beside his nose and his putty face turned serious. "If you've looked at the music on your stands, you'll see that the first concert is to be an all-Russian program and the music is difficult—none of that easy pap you've been used to. I believe that right here in Lafayette we have the talent necessary to perform this music successfully. It means that you will have to work hard; and I will work hard, for I have great ambitions for you. I mean to have this orchestra recognized as the finest in the state, if not the country, for its size and background."

He paused and glanced around. I would fiddle my fingers raw for him, I was so inspired. "We will have no guest artists. This orchestra will be recognized on its own merits and not depend on a guest name to make it look good. Now, please take out the Prokofiev."

I leafed through the portfolio on

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the stand and took out *Lieutenant Kije*. It looked difficult, but certainly the Maestro wouldn't have chosen me if he thought I couldn't become competent by concert time.

Mr. Rossen raised the baton, waited for us to get ready, his lips pursing in and out. His arms and body swooped up like a ballet dancer's, and we played. After four bars his baton spanked the stand. "No! Take it from the beginning!"

The fourth bar again: "No! That's terrible." His fingers raked his hair. "Where did you learn to count? Read your music, people."

The sixth bar: "No! Listen. Ta-ta-*tee*-ta. Take it from the beginning again."

The sixth bar again: "No!" The baton broke over the edge of the stand. He stood back, his hand entangled in his hair, frowning as though the music had betrayed him. "Here. Like this." He snatched Dave Matthews' violin and bow. "Like this." He ran through the offending passage, building beauty with those stunted fingers. "Now, orchestra," he said, absently handing the violin back to Dave. "Same place."

I tried to look serious and vibratoed earnestly, but my bow was a good half inch from the strings.

"What do you think of the symphony, Jeannie?" Mr. Malloy asked me the next day, after my lesson.

"I don't know. It's a lot different from high school."

Mr. Malloy wove fingers behind his head and said, "You know, I majored in conducting." His voice was sort of dreamy, and because he was an adult seeming to take me into his confidence I felt awkward. I listened for a cue so that I could give him the right answer.

"You would be a very patient conductor," I said, hoping I had said the right thing.

He looked into space. "When I talked to the Symphony Board I was almost sure. They took a long time, considering me, talking to me—" Then he seemed to remember who I was, for he stopped, drew back, and there was distance between us again. "Anyway, Rossen's a far cry from Collodi."

It would be hard for anyone to replace the beatified Rafallo Collodi, who checked errors with only a gentle headshake. In the minds of those who had played in the symphony orchestra through the years there were bound to be judgments. Some old standbys would have resented the intrusion of Toscanini himself.

The third rehearsal was one of those doomed wooden nights when everything went wrong. Bits of phrasing and fingering were forgotten. Tempo lagged, starts and stops were ragged, and the percussionist hit the triangle three measures too soon.

A clarinet squawked, and the tip of the baton flew into the fluorescent light. "I plead with you! What are

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you? A kindergarten rhythm band?" He raised the baton stump, but I was too scared to play and faked it elaborately. I could hear the brasses lagging. Mr. Rossen struck the baton against the music stand and it snapped off at the hilt. "You—are—idiots!"

I cringed in my chair and watched him fight for self-control. After a moment he closed the score ponderously and laid limply clasped hands on the stand's edge.

"I am sure I do not see how Collodi put up with this," he said heavily. "But I am not satisfied with what would satisfy a mediocre old man—" (an undercurrent of whispers, for the saint had been defiled) —"and I will not stage a performance as abysmal as this one promises to be. You need more rehearsals. There will be another one, here, on Thursday."

"But—I thought we rehearsed Thursday only on the week prior to a concert," the percussionist ventured. She was a tiny grade-school teacher.

"Thursday at six!" Rossen flared, then dropped his voice again. "I would advise you—all—to check music out from Dave and practice in the meantime." He turned, and left through the door.

On the blowy November evening of my debut as a professional musician ($3 per performance!) we left Dorothy's car in the parking lot overlooking the drainage ditch from the steel mill and climbed the stairs to the stage entrance of Memorial Hall. We wore long black taffetas and I, for one, felt very esthetic and important, climbing those stage-door stairs, my violin case under my arm so anyone around could see it.

Much patriotic fervor had been lavished on Lafayette's Memorial Hall when it was built in the early twenties as a tribute to World War I veterans. It had a U-shaped balcony, box seats, and a slightly tilted ground floor, seating 3000 altogether. Victorian cupids fluttered in the plaster and rose-and-leaf motifs caught the steel-smoke dust in the high molding. The basement, originally designed as a dressing-room and storage area, had long since been converted into offices for the Public Health Department, and the office space upstairs housed the city's voting machines.

From the stage door we followed a sooty steel-floored corridor to the Stage Manager's tiny office, took out our violins, and added our cases to the cordwood-like stack that was growing there. We slid past people chatting in the darkened wings and swished to our chairs on the stage, where some musicians were already warming up their instruments.

I could hear the audience shuffling and coughing in, even through the heavy maroon curtain. I listened to the tootling and the wringing out of great vibrato-ridden chords and realized that finally, sitting very importantly in the

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last chair in the second violins, I was really a part of it.

Someone hissed, the tweeterings ebbed down toward silence, and the curtain hummed up. I looked out on a dark velvet applauding sea with as much disdainful sophistication as my sixteen years could muster. The applause grew in thunder as Mr. Rossen strode almost jauntily out of the wings.

He stepped to the podium, and with one hand very much at ease on the flattened stand he bowed twice, a puffed proud pigeon in impeccable tails and starched shirt front. He smiled expansively and collectively at his audience, then held up his hands for silence.

"I am grateful," his voice rang out over the amplifying system when the silence was moderately complete, "for your warm welcome. I will not, I can not, ever hope to take the place of the gentleman who is, in himself, an institution in this community. I can do no less than dedicate this, the premier concert of the season, to that very great man, Rafallo Collodi, Conductor Emeritus!"

Rossen's arm swooped out and down to the front row in a grand gesture. A slight bent shadow rose and bobbed to orchestra and audience alike. Mr. Czerny rapped the back of his violin with his bow, and the orchestra, taking his lead, joined the applause.

"God, what a hypocrite," the trombonist next to me muttered as he rose to his feet in tribute. Mr. Rossen was clapping, too, but giving us the hot-eye to warn us to stop. In a few moments the house and orchestra applause died down and the oboe blew A for the tuning up. The concert began.

Though there were a few minor mistakes that no one would notice, it was a good concert. My mother said it was simply grand, so I didn't have the heart to tell her that half of my scowling and sincere vibratoing was purely an act.

"I'm afraid I took Mr. Rossen's advice and practiced the symphony pieces," I said apologetically to Mr. Malloy on the next Wednesday.

He smiled understandingly. "He's quite a fellow, isn't he? I was talking to Dave Matthews about him. Dave followed him down here from Denver and worships the ground his little tin god spits on."

"He seems to take Mister Matthews for granted, doesn't he?" I said, hoping I was using the right tone.

"He sure does. Dave's a lackey. A clod." Mr. Malloy stared at something on the wall and absently slipped the Lipescu recording in and out of the shelf beside him. "Rossen's too ambitious. He's driving too hard."

I nodded in dutiful agreement.

"They passed me by for him," he said, dreamily again. "If he hadn't come along at the last minute, I would have had the conductorship."

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"I'm sure you'd do a much better job," I said obediently.

"Do you?" He gave me a faint, far-off smile. "And do you think the others would share your opinion?"

"I'm sure they would." Some orchestra members were dissatisfied, I knew; but I was only timidly saying what I thought Mr. Malloy wanted to hear.

"If he were not there, I would be conductor. Yes . . . yes, indeed."

I hurried my violin out and tuned it. When Mr. Malloy heard my wretched lesson, he said it was good. His eyes kept looking at something a million miles away.

We rehearsed for the December concert in the eye of a hurricane. The rehearsals were so mild, so free from driving and insults (except for occasional sarcasm toward Dave when he didn't pass music out quickly enough) that I began to worry. I was sure—and so was Dorothy—that each new rehearsal would bring a Vesuvius of pent-up epithets and extra rehearsal days; but a wrong note or a tardy instrument brought no more reaction from Mr. Rossen than his own hand raking his thinning gray hair.

Yet we weren't prepared for what happened at the Thursday dress rehearsal at the Hall. The stage seemed crowded and strangers were loitering uneasily on the stage. At 7:30 Mr. Rossen looked up from the score he was studying. "Ah, Mister Guilden, sit there, please." He arced an arm elaborately toward the concertmaster's chair. Mr. Czerny blinked up in surprise and slid over. "Miss Heathery, there, please; and you, there."

After these strangers were assigned places (Dave Matthews had to give way to a portly matron with a dark shiny violin), Mr. Rossen said, "I'm depending on you three to carry the concert next Tuesday. This orchestra is weak." He repeated the last word as though he relished it. "Weak." With no further explanations the rehearsal began.

Mr. Malloy had parked his car next to Dorothy's. After the rehearsal he walked with us to the parking lot. Dave Matthews, with whom he had struck up a sudden friendship, had told him that the three strangers were regulars of the Denver Symphony Orchestra, brought down on the expenses that would have ordinarily gone for a guest artist's fee. This seemed to please Mr. Malloy.

The Denver people were with us for every dress rehearsal and concert from then on.

"The last concert was all right," Mr. Rossen said before the first rehearsal for the January concert, "but the next one must be even better. And the one after that still better. We are going to work hard. Very hard."

He was a man of his word. The season of mildness had passed.

Mr. Rossen became enveloped in

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a desperate intensity. It was as though the entire orchestra had, by some metamorphosis, changed into a single gigantic musical instrument that he, the Maestro, had to master. He played that huge instrument with every part of his body, bobbing up and down, shaking stubby hands, hunching his back. When a part of that instrument betrayed him by being faulty, he cursed, then repaired the fault. As the January concert drew nearer, he screamed and insulted and drove that instrument until its sound was as smooth and precise as the ticking of a fine Swiss watch.

All through December there were Thursday rehearsals. I didn't mind (though I complained with the others), but my mother muttered when I didn't get home before eleven.

Mr. Rossen was a musician, not a mechanic. I was just a minor cog, but I think I was aware even before the maestro of the first serious signs of wear in the great instrument. It started with the music people of Lafayette—the teachers in the high schools and junior highs and the more prominent givers of private lessons. They formed grumbling factions. During the brief cigarette breaks little groups went into corners to talk, often clustering around Mr. Malloy. Dorothy and I were never included in these little groups and we wondered what they were talking about so intently.

The first major breakdown came one snowy Tuesday, just one week before the January concert. A number of musicians had written resignations. When Mr. Rossen found them neatly stacked on his stand, he turned white, then livid, and scathed his defiant instrument with insults and threats ("You stinking quitters! You are paid a salary and you all signed contracts. If you breach those contracts, you are in for a lawsuit so big it'll make your heads swim!")

When everyone showed up for the concert the next Tuesday, Mr. Malloy shrugged sorrowfully across the orchestra at someone. The concert was evidently good. My mother read me the review of it in Wednesday's *Star-Journal* and it glowed with superlatives. The music critic said that it was unquestionably the best concert in the history of our symphony orchestra.

I don't know whether it was just Mr. Rossen's determination to make the February concert even better than the January one, or whether the Maestro was exacting revenge for the threatened resignations. Whatever his reasons, he announced at the first rehearsal that there would be a few Friday rehearsals, too. I didn't particularly care, but I took my cue and groaned along with everybody.

Mr. Malloy and his grumbling groups grew larger. They became a threatening force, strong enough to complain openly. At the next rehearsal the percussionist raised her

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hand and cleared her throat, just as the Maestro poised his baton for the downbeat of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

"Mister Rossen, I—I've been asked to tell you something."

He lowered the baton with ill-concealed impatience.

"Mister Rossen, rehearsing three times a week is too much. We have families and children and—other things. I mean, last year it was fun playing in the orchestra, and we all enjoyed it."

Murmurs of approval and nodding heads.

"And if—well, I don't quite know how to put it—but we're all adults and would appreciate being treated as adults. We don't mind criticism but— "

"So." He cut her off. "Who told you to say this to me?"

"Well, I don't want to mention names but— " Her eyes strayed involuntarily toward Mr. Malloy.

"Tell me this, then. Are they men?"

"Some of them, yes."

"If they have a woman speak for them, they are not men." He dismissed her with a flip of his hand. I turned to see her wilting behind the tympani and glockenspiel.

"I was one of 'em," the clarinetist said. He lounged defiantly back in the folding chair, with one foot crossed over his knee.

"So was I."

"Me, too."

Others took up the chorus.

Mr. Rossen slowly scanned the orchestra, his eyes considering, his tongue tracing his lips. "What if I say you are to come to rehearsals as often as I call them?"

"We might not show up," the clarinetist shot right back.

The room was heavy with the silence. The challenge had been given, and I was a part of that unruly instrument that dared defy the master. If my eyes chanced to meet his, he would surely think that I, too, had been one of the conspirators. I glued my eyes to the Beethoven, desperately neutral.

"You have read the newspapers? You have read the concert reviews when they come out in the Wednesday edition? Very laudatory, weren't they? They said the orchestra sounded better than it ever did before."

I dared my eyes toward his face. His voice was very quiet, but his body was taut, his eyes brittle.

"You know, the *Star-Journal* wants an interview with me, but I've been too busy with you—and this—" (two fingers tapped the music on his stand) —"to give them one. But how would it look to the good citizens of Lafayette if I gave them that interview? And if in that interview I made a desperate plea for *new* musicians because you, and you—and I'd name each of you—didn't want to rehearse any more? Lafayette doesn't think their symphony concerts are tea parties. Only you who call yourselves musi-

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cians—bah!—only you do. Wouldn't that look good in the papers? If the orchestra sounds good, it is because you made it so. You don't *have* to come to rehearsals. No one's *forcing* you. But—" He spread his hands eloquently.

We began rehearsing immediately. At the rehearsal the next Friday every chair was filled.

The dress rehearsal for the February concert started badly. A heavy snowstorm snarled traffic, and Dorothy and I were nearly late. We ran onto the stage in our wet coats and took out our instruments. There were a lot of empty chairs (all the Denver people were there, however) and musicians straggled in with their instruments, their coats smelling wet-wool.

"This auditorium . . ." Mr. Rossen said at last, taking in the entire orchestra in one malevolent glare. It was ten of eight, and people were still straggling in. "This auditorium costs the Symphony Board fifty dollars an hour. This we pay to sit and wait while certain privileged people make a Hollywood entrance?"

"But the snow—" someone piped from the brass section.

"*Damn* the snow. If it's snowing you start earlier. You know that. You are adults—you said so yourselves." The latecomers became very busy getting their instruments ready. "Then your instruments have to become warm. It will be a wasted rehearsal for half an hour until you blow your horns warm."

"If you wouldn't rant and rave so much," the trombonist next to me blurted, "we wouldn't be here so long, and you wouldn't have to pay so much for this damn auditorium." He had been one of the latecomers and as he spoke he wriggled out of his overcoat.

Mr. Rossen's eyes were brittle as glass, glaring at the trombonist who coolly went on removing his overcoat. Then the conductor lifted the baton.

We were a few measures into the Beethoven (I could play this part rather well) when the baton whipped over the edge of the stand. "You stink! You all stink to high *heaven!*" On the last word his voice broke. I peered gingerly over the edge of my stand. His face was like a rock that seemed to melt before my eyes. Then he wilted and grasped the edge of his stand so hard that his knuckles turned white.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and his almost nonexistent chin disappeared into his chest. He stood that way for a few seconds, breathing hard, getting control of himself, then raised his head.

"Mister Collodi will be at the concert," he said softly, but I heard the barest suggestion of a tremor in his voice. "And with him will be—" (a pause, then whispered reverence)—"Gregor Lipescu! So you *must* be good. Please. *Please!*"

He was baring his soul and I felt

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as uncomfortable as I had the day Mr. Malloy told me the Symphony Board had rejected him in favor of Mr. Rossen. He was pleading with us to impress one of America's foremost conductors and it was pitiable to the point of embarrassment.

He raised the baton and gave us the downbeat again. "You are idiots! You are kindergarteners!" Back on familiar ground once more, we rehearsed until after midnight . . .

The February concert was bound to be good. That great unruly instrument, the Lafayette Civic Symphony, had been bullied and rehearsed and disciplined into perfect working order, and the Maestro, Mr. Rossen, would play it for Mr. Lipescu with stunning brilliance.

As usual, Dorothy and I drove over together, left our cases in the Stage Manager's cubicle, and took our places. I always liked to watch the musicians stroll in. They were dressed all in black, and the bright lights sculptured hollows under their cheekbones.

Mr. Malloy came in and paused at my chair. "How'd you like to be promoted to the first violins for the next concert, Jeannie?"

I smiled wanly and wondered if he was drunk. He went to his chair, but instead of playing big chords as he usually did, he laid his bow on the stand, tucked the violin under his arm, and leaned back. From across the stage a cellist waved to him and made a zero with his thumb and middle finger. Mr. Malloy answered by raising clasped hands, prizefighter fashion, as high as he could without dropping his violin. The trombonist next to me blatted out the opening of *The Old Gray Mare* and followed it with a raspberry. If they had planned to burn the conductor in effigy at a party after the concert, I thought, it would explain why everybody was so happy.

Then the curtain rose and the applause sounded like a full house. Whatever else may be said of Mr. Rossen, he was building a name for the Lafayette orchestra. I looked out at the audience to try to see Mr. Collodi, for Gregor Lipescu would be sitting next to him, but the lights were in my eyes.

Mr. Rossen came out of the wings and walked along the stage apron to the podium. He walked with a strange doll-like gait, and at the podium started to nod to the oboe, turned, and as though remembering at the last minute, bowed to the audience. The jauntiness of the first concert was gone. The man was stiff and he looked scared.

When he turned his back on the audience and faced us, the putty face gleamed with sweat above the high starched collar. The oboe blew an A. While the orchestra tuned, Mr. Rossen flexed the ivory baton until I was sure it would snap. I scratched my violin approximately in tune and stood it in my lap. A

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sudden unwarranted twinge of excitement stirred in my stomach, and my hands were clammy on the violin neck.

I was waiting for something—I didn't know quite what—and was watching the Maestro. who looked thinner and paler, shrunken within himself. I began to get that unreal feeling again, the one I had had at the tryouts so long ago.

He lifted the baton and as one, all the instruments raised to playing positions. Mr. Rossen's hands were claws and his arms went up, then fell dramatically for the first chord of the *Fifth*. I was sure of the opening and swept all my nervousness into hitting that first note. I heard myself almost alone, the sound looming and echoing in my own ears, and sweat popped out all over my body.

For one horrified moment I thought I had played in the wrong place, and stopped the bow with a jerk. All around me instruments tweetered to a faltering halt.

I looked around wildly, and other musicians were staring, too, their eyes frightened, uncomprehending. Yet other musicians were leering, their instruments lying in their laps. A silence as tangible as a shroud grew and gathered over the stage.

I worked my eyes toward the podium. Mr. Rossen stood frozen there, his arms outstretched, mouth agape, eyes popping. Then, like a robot, his arms jerked over his head again, gathering for that tremendous downbeat. He dashed his arms down—and this time the silence was complete.

I have never seen a face like that, on a living man. The color faded to absolute chalk and the glassy eyes widened unbelievably. He froze again, and I think both he and I realized, at last, what was happening. Suddenly I felt physically sick and my ears buzzed. Above the buzzing I could hear the embarrassed rustling of the audience.

"Collodi," someone called out. A chant started in the brasses and spread through the whole orchestra. "We want Collodi! We want Collodi!"

Mr. Rossen was now a caricature of himself, something out of a slapstick comedy. It was terribly funny, his face, his stance, but it didn't belong here, on the stage of the Memorial Hall, with a full audience to see it. Still, it was funny. A little giggle mixed with the nausea in my stomach and got as far as my throat. I clapped my hand over my mouth so that it wouldn't come out.

"We want—" The chant dissolved into applause and high-schoolish hurrahs. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a bent figure stumbling through the shadows of the first row to the aisle. There was some light in the foyer at the back of the Hall, and silhouetted in this light I saw the man's hands raised against the orchestra, as though warding it off. Yet he worked his

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way to the aisle and labored up the stage steps to the apron.

Mr. Rossen followed him with his eyes. Somehow the Maestro's hair had become mussed and it stood out from his head like a halo of disaster. He still had the baton in his hand. He looked at it as though he'd never seen it before, then laid it very carefully on the stand. He erked his shoulders back and walked with perfect dignity to the opposite wings.

Mr. Collodi, straight and dry, stepped to the podium, and the orchestra gradually grew quiet. He looked at us—into us, it seemed to me—for a long time. His eyes glistened wetly and his great blade of a nose was rosy at the tip.

He shook his head slowly, regretfully. "You don't—know—what you've done! Lower the curtain!" An unseen button was pushed and the acres of velvet hummed down.

Dave Matthews shoved blindly through stands and musicians toward the dark wing that had swallowed Mr. Rossen. The curtain billowed to the stage, cutting us off from the shocked audience, leaving us alone with a growing guilt. No one moved; we sat looking expectantly at Mr. Collodi who seemed on the verge of speaking.

Something more than age was was making him tremble. Once or twice he shielded his eyes, as though a bright sun were shining. "I have worked with some of you for years," he said at last, slowly, sadly, "and I thought I knew you. Who told you you were gods, to destroy a career on a whim?"

Musicians, now quite sobered, shifted uneasily in their chairs. Mr. Collodi controlled a lip tremor and went on, "That man burned once with a desire to become a concert violinist. He slaved twelve hours a day for years—to discover that he lacked that inborn something of a true Heifitz. But music was more than life to him. He was past thirty when he started all over again in music, this time to conduct. He has a flair for conducting that amounts to genius. I watched him conducting his little college orchestra in Denver. After I saw him I recommended him to the Symphony Board. He could be as great as Munch or Ormandy, because he has the gift, the determination, the sheer donkey stamina."

He was looking at Mr. Malloy as he said this. He paused for a long time frowning, either keeping back tears or choosing words—I couldn't tell which. The stage was very quiet.

"You do not get the conductorship of orchestras like the New York Philharmonic handed to you on a silver platter. If you are lucky, you are apprenticed to a Leonard Bernstein. If you are not lucky, you take a small orchestra and make it sound so good that you will be noticed and—more important—remembered. Once in a lifetime a break might come. A great

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and famous conductor dies, or gets ready to retire without leaving a successor; so you pray that he might have noticed your little orchestra and been impressed. You pray for the chance to be that great one's protégé, to be groomed to fill his shoes.

"It is even very hard to get a little orchestra. Mister Rossen left Julliard three years ago and taught music in colleges, waiting for an opening. Then he heard that a tired old man named Collodi was retiring; and he applied. And he replaced me and made of you what I couldn't—a professional symphony orchestra. I have attended every concert and each time I was amazed at what he had accomplished with you. Each of you plays better now than you ever did before, and yet you hate him because he made you good." He paused and quickly wiped his eyes.

"Gregor Lipescu is retiring. Few people know it. Lipescu is looking for a successor. I sent a tape recording of your last concert to him and he came here from New York to hear an amateur orchestra that an unknown conductor had made to sound like the Boston Symphony. Tonight was Mr. Rossen's audition, his big chance—perhaps his only big chance—and you took it away from him."

We sat like department store dummies, each person guilty, but some of us guiltier than others. Feet scrambled offstage, and Dave Matthews rushed in to stand at the end of the stage, looking very small.

"He just killed himself," he said. His voice had the whine of disbelief. "There was a truck coming and he threw himself under it. The wheels—went over his head."

There was a collective gasp, then no other sound. Dave was weeping quietly, his face against the wall.

"You are all responsible," Mr. Collodi spoke at last. His eyes were brimming. "Did someone organize you to do this? Mister Malloy, you wanted the conductorship very badly." He paused. "Mister Malloy, were you responsible?"

His eyes searched through the orchestra. As they passed over me I had an electric flash of recollection—of a Wednesday lesson, of an empty conversation. There seemed to be no one else on the stage but myself and Mr. Malloy, accomplices in committing a murder.

Singly, ashamedly, people filtered away from the stage. Dorothy waited patiently for me at the stage door. But it was a long time before I could trust my legs to take me away . . .

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The characters, events, and background in this story are purely fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to real events and background, living or dead, are purely coincidental.

THE UNPREDICTABLE FACTOR

by STEVE APRIL

WILLIS WAS A MILD LITTLE punk smart enough to realize that his safety lay in petty, but carefully planned, stick-ups. In looks he was almost a model of the average person—medium height, plain face, in his thirties; his clothes were ordinary, his build average. He was always careful not to hang out with other hoods or be seen in flashy night spots.

Willis' modus operandi was simple but effective: he would pick an isolated store, hold it up, then rush back to the modest neighborhood in which he roomed—a section full of respectable and hard-working people; he was known to his landlady and to the other roomers as a shipping clerk.

Willis had successfully robbed 22 stores and every victim had told the police the same thing: "What did he look like? Why, like a thousand guys I see on the street every day! No, sir, there wasn't *anything* about him that was unusual or different."

The hold-ups generally yielded from $100 to $300, and on this loot Willis lived a modest and average life—going to the movies now and then with a girl, bowling once a week, having a few drinks over the week-end.

Willis' next job was going to be a step up the crime ladder. He had "cased" a small but busy dry-cleaning store just off the city's main street. Willis figured he'd score at least a grand, and the job appealed to him because the store was actually isolated, although less than 100 feet from the busy street. The store formed one part of the U-shaped side entrance of a corner office building and did a thriving business from customers in nearby hotels and offices. Yet it was completely hidden from the view of anybody walking on the main street.

As usual, Willis planned carefully. The shop closed at 7:30 p.m., but at 6:30 p.m., when most people were at supper, he could step in and within a minute or two scoop up the entire day's take. Judging by the number of people rushing in and out for the "1 Hour Cleaning Special" during the mornings and afternoons, the till should be bulging.

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What's more, by walking down a side street, then running through a factory alley which was deserted after 5:30 p.m., Willis could catch a bus that would take him across town to within a block of his bowling alley. He even put in a few hours making up a bus schedule: one reached the corner at 6:40. If he entered the store at 6:30 and things went according to plan, he should be on the bus and miles from the scene, in the bowling alley, before 7:00.

On the night he'd picked for the job Willis noticed a new clerk behind the counter, an outgoing and talkative man with a big smile who seemed to send the few late customers into fits of laughter. Willis was near the shop at 6:15 p.m., impatiently waiting while a stout woman paid for her cleaning, joking and laughing with the clerk. She finally left at 6:23. Willis waited a few minutes to make certain no one turned the corner from the main street, then he entered the store at exactly 6:29.

The jolly clerk beamed as he said, "Good evening, sir. Would you be interested in buying a brand-new imported tweed suit for $10? Of course I have to tell you—the trousers have three legs."

"You kidding?" Willis asked.

"Indeed not, sir," the clerk smiled. "It's really a tremendous bargain. Let me show it to you." He reached under the counter and took out a tweed jacket and a three-legged pair of pants. "Think of it—a $150 suit, look at the label, for ten bucks! The—"

"Shut up!" Willis snarled.

"I mean it, sir," the clerk went on, a twinkle in his eyes. "It's a superdooper—"

Willis pulled out his gun. "This is a stick-up!"

For a moment the smile froze on the clerk's face, then he gasped, "Oh, not really?"

"Damn right it's real! If you don't want a taste of lead, open the register! Put all the bills and change—half bucks and quarters—in a paper bag! Fast and quiet and you won't get hurt!"

"Yes, sir! Please don't shoot me," the clerk begged, emptying the register, then handing the heavy paper bag to Willis.

"Now lay down behind the counter and stay there for five minutes! My pal is waiting outside—one move out of you, just one peep, and he'll blast your head off!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" The clerk dived to the floor like an acrobat.

Willis left the store, walked quickly but casually down to the next corner, where he turned into the side street. Then running through the factory alley, Willis took an evening paper from his pocket and folded it over the paper bag.

He was calmly waiting at the bus stop 15 seconds before the bus arrived.

Less than a half hour later Willis

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stepped into the bowling alley, nodded at the cashier, and went to the Men's Room. Sitting in a booth he calmly counted the loot—$989.75, mostly in bills.

He went out and watched a bowling team for a few minutes, then dropped over to the bar and ordered a sandwich and a beer, using up some of the silver. He told the bartender, "We had some five-and-ten poker during lunch hour. My luck was riding high."

Willis killed the evening watching more bowling matches and drinking more beer. He decided not to bowl but he left the gun in his bowling-bag locker. By 1:00 a.m. he started yawning. He paid his tab and started toward his looming house.

A policeman was using the call box on the corner—a routine report to the platoon sergeant. When Willis walked by, the cop pulled out a photo, then ran over, shoved his gun in Willis' back, and expertly cuffed his hands.

While the police officer was phoning for a squad car, Willis asked, "Officer, what's this all about? You must have me mixed up with somebody else. I've been in the bowling alley all evening and you can—say, whose snapshot are you looking at?"

"Yours, you dumb jerk," the cop said, showing him a clear photo, a close-up of Willis holding a gun on the store clerk. "Hundreds of these snaps were given out—to every officer on the midnight shift."

"How did anybody ever take this . . . ?" Willis mumbled. "Hundreds of copies?"

"You're a big shot, a real celebrity. About fifty million people will see you on television next week. That store you held up was rigged for the Concealed Camera TV show!"

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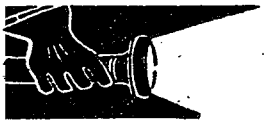

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

ecommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

wo imperatives for every library of short crime fiction are Stanley Ellin's IE BLESSINGTON METHOD (Random, $3.95), 10 dazzling stories of irony, rror and deep perception (mostly EQMM prizewinners), and Raymond iandler's KILLER IN THE RAIN (Houghton Mifflin, $5.50), edited by Philip urham, 8 splendid pulp novelets (1935–41) later "cannibalized" in the iilip Marlowe novels but rewarding in their own right. To which you may d ELLERY QUEEN'S 1965 ANTHOLOGY (Davis, $1), one of the best-designed all this grand series, with shorts, novelets, criticism and fact-crime by the Presidents to date of Mystery Writers of America.

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The long-retired Hercule Poirot cannot resist armchairing a murder ind his unretired creator can still discover new tricks of the trade.

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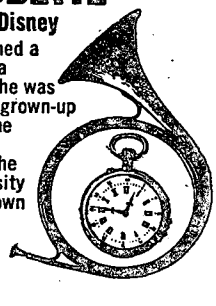

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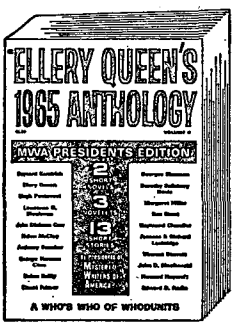

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We are happy to welcome Vincent Starrett back to the pages of EQMM, with the story of a murderer, hunted by the Chicago police, who hit upon an ingenious—no, more than that, a brilliant, a perfect hideout in the heart of a big city . . .

MAN IN HIDING

by VINCENT STARRETT

DR. B. EDWARD LOXLEY (jocularly called "Bedward" by the Chicago gossip columnists), the wife-murderer for whom hundreds of police had been scouring the city for three weeks, sat quietly at his desk in the great Merchandise Exchange reading his morning mail. The frosted glass door of his outer office read simply: *William Drayham, Rare Books. Hours by Appointment.* After three weeks of security he was beginning to feel a little complacent. For three weeks he had not left his hiding place in the huge business complex and he had no intention of leaving it for the time being—except feet first.

It had all been carefully thought out beforehand. The office of "William Drayham" had been rented two months prior to the killing of his wife, and Loxley had quietly taken possession and created his new personality as a dealer in rare books. He had been accepted by all his neighbors in the sixth floor corridor. The elevator starter was getting to know him. He breakfasted, lunched, and dined at the several restaurants in the building, was shaved by a favorite barber, and was—he had every reason to believe—an accepted fixture. His neighbors were inoffensive and unimaginative workers who did not for a moment question his identity, and the words *Rare Books* on the door were formidable enough to frighten away casual visitors.

Lora Loxley, murdered by suffocation, had been buried for nearly three weeks and even the newspapers were beginning to play down the sensational story. The feeling was growing that Dr. Loxley himself might also have been murdered and a desultory search for his body continued whenever the police had nothing more urgent to occupy them. Since Loxley's office window overlooked the river where, in addition to the normal traffic, police boats occasionally plied, he was able to watch the activities on the river with amused appreciation. He had now spent two lonely Saturdays and Sundays watching the week-end traffic with a pair of binoculars, waiting for any active renewal of

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police attention. He was on excellent terms with the watchmen in his part of the giant building, and they were now accustomed to seeing him at the most unlikely hours.

The Merchandise Exchange was actually a city within a city. It contained everything a man in hiding needed—restaurants, laundries, barber shops, tobacconists, dentists, newsstands, banking facilities, a gymnasium, even a postal station. He was already known by name in the restaurants and barber shops. He bought all the newspapers, morning and evening. Occasionally he dictated a letter to one of the public stenographers, ordering or declining rare books. As William Drayham he had a sufficient banking account downstairs for all his immediate needs. The rest of his wealth, in cash, was waiting in Paris—as was Gloria.

His principal bogies had been the watchmen and the cleaning women. But both fears had vanished. The watchmen had proved friendly, and the cleaning women, a friendly trio who liked candy, readily agreed to visit his office while he was having a late dinner. His domestic arrangements were simple. He slept on a couch in his inner office, which also contained a vault to which he could retire in an emergency. To date there had been no emergency . . .

Dr. Loxley pushed the mail aside impatiently. It was too early to expect a large response to the small rare-book advertisement he was running in a Sunday book-review supplement. But it was not too early for the coffee that Miss Marivole Boggs was willing to serve at all hours. What luck to have found so admirable a neighbor in the same corridor, and even, it might be said, in the same line! Rare books and antiques went very well together. Miss Boggs had been responsible for most of his infrequent customers. He glanced at his expensive wrist watch and left William Drayham's rare books without a pang.

The owner of *M. Boggs, Antiques*, as she described herself on the show window of her small shop at the end of the corridor, looked up at his entrance.

"Hello," she said. "I was hoping you'd come in."

"I couldn't resist," he said. His brown eyes took in the familiar room, resting for a moment on the suit of ancient armor that dominated one corner of the shop and the old Spanish chest that was Miss Boggs's pride and joy. "Well, I see nobody has bought either of them yet." It was one of their standing jokes that some day, when the rare-book business was better, he would buy them himself.

As Marivole Boggs poured his coffee she said, "The newspaper stories about that doctor are getting shorter every day. I'm beginning to believe he really *was* murdered."

They often discussed the missing Dr. Loxley, as indeed the whole city was doing. At first it had been

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Miss Boggs's idea that the "society doctor" had murdered his wife in favor of a more glamorous patient who was now living in sin with him somewhere on the French or Italian Riviera.

Dr. Loxley had thought not. "Too romantic, Miss Boggs. I still think his body is in the river or floating on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. That scarf they found on the river bank looks like it."

"Anyway, the police seem to have stopped looking," said Miss Boggs.

"Anyway, this is good coffee, my dear. I hope you'll give me your special recipe. Do you still plan to leave this month?"

"At once," she said. "I'm flying to New York tomorrow, if I can get away. I want to be in London for the Exhibition; then on to Paris, Rome, and Zurich. I'm enormously relieved that you'll be here to keep an eye on things, Bill. Coffee at all hours, eh?"

"Morning, noon, and night," he agreed, rising to leave. Her change of plan had startled him for a moment; but he was quick to see a distinct advantage in it for himself. "Never fear, I'll be here waiting for you when you return."

Strolling back to his own shop, humming a jaunty air, he became aware of a man leaving the doorway of the office directly opposite his own. Something about the man's carriage seemed familiar. The man was heading toward the elevators and walking fast. In an instant they would meet.

And suddenly Dr. Loxley realized that the man was, indeed, familiar. He was his own brother-in-law, Lawrence Bridewell.

Loxley's first instinct was to turn and flee, his second to return to to *M. Boggs, Antiques.* His final decision, made in a split second, was to see the encounter through. His disguise had fooled better men than Larry Bridewell, although none who knew him better. With his former neat beard and mustache now gone, and his blue eyes transformed by brown contact lenses, Dr. Loxley was, to all appearances, another man. After that first appalling moment of indecision he fumbled for a cigarette, realizing that after three weeks of growingly complacent safety, he was about to face the supreme test.

He tried and failed to light the cigarette . . . Then the two men were face to face, glancing at each other as men do in passing—and suddenly the test was over.

Or was it? Bridewell continued on his way to the elevators, still walking fast, and Loxley stumbled to his own door.

Did he dare look back? Had Bridewell turned to look back at *him?* Moving casually, Loxley stole a glance down the corridor. There was no doubt about it—Larry *was* looking back. Perhaps he had merely been troubled by an imagined resemblance . . .

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Dr. Loxley had some difficulty opening his own door, and just before he closed it, the thought occurred to him to look at the name on the door of the office from which his brother-in-law had emerged. Actually he knew very well what he would find there: *Jackson & Fortworth, Attorneys-at-Law;* and below, the significant words: *Private Investigations.*

He tried to take himself in hand and was annoyed to find that he was shaking. Experimentally he ventured a drink to see what it would do for him. It helped considerably. But the whole incident haunted him the rest of the day and gave him a bad night. In the morning, however, his fears had evaporated. He was his confident self again until, a few hours later, a second incident shook his nerve.

Returning from the cigar stand in the lobby, he passed the De Luxe Dog Salon in one of the street-level corridors and, as he had often done before, paused to look into the windows at the fashionable dogs being barbered and prettified. It had always been an amusing spectacle, but this time, as he turned away, an appalling thing happened.

A well-dressed women was approaching the salon with a haughty French poodle on a leash. The woman looked familiar. Good lord, she *was* familiar! She was Mrs. Montgomery Hyde, an old patient of his. Loxley's heart seemed to stop beating. Would she recognize him?

It was the dog that recognized him. With a refined little yelp the poodle jerked the leash from the woman's hand and flung himself against the doctor's legs.

With an effort Loxley recovered his balance and somehow managed to recover his poise. It was his worst moment since the murder. Automatically he disengaged himself from the poodle's attentions and pulled the black ears.

"There, there, fellow," he said to the excited animal in a voice that he hoped was not his own. "I beg your pardon, Madam. Your dog appears to have made a mistake."

To his intense relief Mrs. Montgomery Hyde agreed.

"Do forgive Toto's impulsiveness," she begged, snatching up the leash. "He loves everybody."

Dr. Loxley left the scene in almost a hurry. She had not recognized him! It seemed to him a miracle; but again he was annoyed to find himself shaking. And yet, wasn't it really a good omen? If Mrs. Hyde and his own brother-in-law had failed to recognize him, was there anything for him to fear?

Immediately he began to feel better. But when he had returned to his office, William Drayham again treated himself to a stiff drink.

In a moment of alert intelligence he realized that for three weeks he had permitted himself to become too complacent. His meeting with Mrs. Hyde had taught him some-

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thing that was important for him to remember: he had almost spoken her name! In the first onslaught of panic he might well have betrayed himself. If it was important for him not to be recognized, it was equally important that *he* must not recognize anyone else.

It was clear to him now that this cat-and-mouse existence could not go on indefinitely. He must remain in hiding only until it was safe for him to emerge and get out of the country. Then William Drayham would ostentatiously pack his books and remove to New York. After that, the world was wide, with his immediate destination—Paris and Gloria.

For several days the chastened doctor lived cautiously, visiting *M. Boggs, Antiques* at intervals for coffee and to admire the suit of armor and the Spanish chest, which continued to fascinate him. He had promised Miss Boggs, now on her travels, not to cut the price on either if a buyer should turn up.

Twice, returning from the antique shop, he again caught a glimpse of his brother-in-law—both times entering the law office of Jackson & Fortworth, and had hurried to lock himself in his own office before Larry could emerge. What the devil did the fellow want with a firm of private investigators anyway?

The visit of Jackson, the senior lawyer of the firm, to the bookshop one morning took the doctor completely by surprise, or he might have locked the door.

"I've been intending to look in on you for some time, Mr. Drayham," said the lawyer cordially. "I'm Jackson, just across from you. Rare books have always interested me. Mind if I look around? I think that browse is the word."

Loxley rose from his chair abruptly, knocking a book from his desk to the floor. An icy fear had entered his heart. Was this the showdown at last, he wondered.

He shook hands effusively. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Jackson. By all means, browse. Is there anything special I can show you?"

But Jackson was already browsing. When he had finished he strolled to the window. "Nice view of the river you have," he said appreciatively. "*My* windows all face an inner court." He walked to the door. "Just wanted to meet you, Mr. Drayham. I'll come in again when I have more time."

"Any time at all," said Loxley with warm courtesy.

Dr. Loxley sat down at his desk and reached for the lower drawer. Another little drink wouldn't hurt. What had the fellow really wanted? What had he hoped to learn? Or was he really one of those strange people who collected rare books?

One thing, however, was undeniably clear. Any day now he might have to leave the building and the city. If he was suspected, the blow would fall swiftly. At any minute

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the door might open again, and this time Jackson might not be alone. Why not get out of this trap immediately? What was there to stop him? His stock—300-odd volumes of miscellaneous volumes bought at a storage house—could be left behind if necessary.

What stopped him was Gloria's cable from Paris: TROUBLE HERE. PHONING FRIDAY NIGHT.

This was Thursday. Whatever else happened, he must wait for Gloria's call. His hand moved toward the lower drawer, then withdrew. Coffee, not whiskey, was what he needed; and after luncheon he spent most of the afternoon with Miss Boggs's weird collection of antiques. There he had an unobstructed view of Jackson's door, and was not himself visible. If Larry Bridewell was among the lawyer's visitors, Loxley did not see him.

Exploring the antique shop he paused, as always, to admire its two star exhibits, the almost frightening suit of armor and the massive Spanish chest. In a pinch either would do as an emergency hiding place—if there was time enough to hide.

That evening he was startled to find his picture in the newspaper again—the face of Dr. B. Edward Loxley as he had looked, with the neat little beard and mustache, before he had murdered his wife. It seemed that he'd been arrested by an alert Seattle policeman, but had denied his identity.

Dr. Loxley drew a long breath of relief. After all, perhaps he was still safe in this city within a city. But what could Gloria have to say to him that required a call from Paris? Bad news of some kind. Bad for somebody.

In spite of all his new fears he hated to leave the building that had been his refuge. It had been his hope to live there indefinitely, undetected—never again to venture into the streets until Dr. Loxley was as forgotten as Dr. Crippen.

Again he slept off his fears and spent an uninterrupted forenoon with his view of the river and the morning newspapers. He was beginning to feel almost at ease again; indeed, when the insufferable Jackson knocked on his locked door and called a hearty greeting he almost welcomed having a visitor.

But there was somebody with the attorney. Through the frosted pane Loxley could make out the shadowy outline of another man.

"May we come in?" the lawyer called out. "I've got a couple of friends here who want to talk to you."

Loxley rose uncertainly to his feet and moved to the door. So it had come at last! He had been right about his damned brother-in-law and this sneaking lawyer. This was the showdown. And suddenly Loxley knew what he had to do.

He unlocked the door and threw it open. "Come in, gentlemen," he

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said without emotion. "What can I do for you?"

Jackson was beaming. "These are my friends, Sergeants Coughlin and Ripkin, from Headquarters. They hope you will come quietly." The lawyer laughed heartily at his own witticism.

"Come in, gentlemen, and sit down." Loxley forced a smile—he was panicking fast. He seated himself at his desk trembling, and addressed and stamped an envelope. Then he stood up, shakily. "I was just going to the mail chute with an important letter. I'll be back in a few moments."

"Sure," said one of the two cops genially. "Take your time, Mr. Drayham."

Was there just the slightest emphasis on the name "Drayham"? Or was he merely imagining it?

Dr. Loxley closed the outer door behind him and almost ran for *M. Boggs, Antiques.* As he locked the door of the antique shop, still shaking, he was relieved to see that the corridor was empty. They would follow him, of course, in a matter of minutes. Every office in the building would be searched, every office in the vast Merchandise Exchange.

It *had* to be the chest!

It stood open as always, and he squeezed inside—an uncomfortable fit—then lowered the heavy lid until only a thin crack remained for air. Faintly now he thought he could hear footsteps in the corridor. He drew a deep breath and closed the lid.

There was a sharp "click," then only intense darkness . . .

Ten minutes later Sergeant Ripkin said to his partner, "Wonder what's keeping that guy. We've still got about fifty tickets to sell, Pete."

"Oh, leave some with me," said Jackson. "I'll see that you get your money. Drayham's a good fellow—he'll buy a batch of them, I'm sure."

The two policeman, who had been hoping to dispose of all their remaining tickets for a benefit baseball game, departed leisurely.

The disappearance of William Drayham, a "rare book dealer" with an office in the Merchandise Exchange, attracted less attention than the disappearance of Dr. B. Edward Loxley; but for a few days it was a mild sensation.

Returning from Europe a month later, Miss Boggs wondered idly when Bill would drop in for a cup of coffee. He had told her he would be here when she returned.

She puttered happily among her treasures. Some fool, she noted, had automatically locked the chest by closing it. One of these days she'd have to unlock it and raise the lid . . .

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a **HERCULE POIROT** *novelet*

A mystery about one of the world's richest men is always irresistible; and when that man is an eccentric (for example, his diet consisted exclusively of cabbage soup and caviar), then it is time to call in Hercule Poirot, of the green eyes and the little gray cells. But beware: as Poirot himself said, "Motive and opportunity are not enough. There must also be—" But find out for yourself . . .

THE THREE STRANGE POINTS

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

HERCULE POIROT GAVE THE house a steady, appraising glance. His eyes wandered to its surroundings—the shops, the big factory building opposite, the blocks of cheap mansion flats.

Then his eyes returned to Northway House, relic of an earlier age of space and leisure, when green fields had surrounded its well-bred arrogance. Now it was an anachronism, submerged and forgotten in the sea of modern London.

Few people could have told you to whom it belonged, though its owner's name would have been recognized as one of the world's richest men. But money can quench publicity as well as flaunt it. Benedict Farley, that eccentric millionaire, chose not to advertise his choice of residence.

He himself was rarely seen. From time to time he appeared at board meetings, his lean figure, beaked nose, and rasping voice easily dominating the assembled directors. Apart from that, he was just a well-known figure of legend.

There were his strange meannesses, his incredible generosities, his famous patchwork dressing gown, now reputed to be twenty-eight years old, his invariable diet of cabbage soup and caviar, his hatred of cats. All these things the public knew.

Hercule Poirot knew them also. It was all he did know of the man he was about to visit. The letter in his coat pocket told him little more.

He pressed the bell, glancing as he did so at the neat wrist watch which had at last replaced the large turnip-faced watch of earlier days. It was exactly 9:30.

The door opened after just the right interval. A perfect specimen

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of the genus butler stood outlined against the lighted hall.

"Mr. Benedict Farley?" asked Hercule Poirot.

The impersonal glance surveyed him from head to foot, inoffensively but effectively.

En gros et en detail, thought Hercule Poirot to himself with appreciation.

"You have an appointment, sir?" asked the suave voice.

"Yes."

"Your name, sir?"

"M. Hercule Poirot."

The butler bowed and drew back. But there was yet one more formality before the deft hands took hat and stick from the visitor.

"You will excuse me, sir. I was to ask for a letter."

With deliberation, Poirot took from his pocket the folded letter and handed it to the butler. The latter gave it a mere glance, then returned it with a bow. Its contents were simple:

Northway House, W. 8

M. HERCULE POIROT.

Dear Sir: Mr. Benedict Farley would like to have the benefit of your advice. If convenient to yourself, he would be glad if you would call upon him at the above address at 9:30 tomorrow (Thursday) evening.

Yours truly,

HUGO CORNWORTHY,
Secretary.

P. S.: Please bring this letter with you.

The butler said, "Will you please come up to Mr. Cornworthy's room?" and led the way up the broad staircase. Poirot followed him, looking with appreciation at such *objets d'art* as were of an opulent and florid nature. His taste in art was always of a bourgeois nature.

On the upper floor the butler knocked on a door.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose very slightly. It was the first jarring note. For the best butlers do not knock at doors, and yet, indubitably, this was a first-class butler.

A voice from within called out something. The butler threw open the door. He announced—and again Poirot sensed the deliberate departure from orthodoxy, "The gentleman you are expecting, sir."

It was a fair-sized room, very plainly furnished in a workmanlike fashion. Filing cabinets, books of reference, a couple of easy chairs, and an imposing desk covered with neatly docketed papers. The only light came from a big green-shaded reading lamp which stood on a small table by the arm of one of the easy chairs. It was placed so as to cast its full light on anyone approaching from the door.

Hercule Poirot blinked, realizing that the lamp bulb was at least one hundred and fifty watts. In the armchair sat a thin figure in a patchwork dressing gown—Benedict Farley. His head was stuck forward in a characteristic attitude, his beaked nose projecting like that of a bird.

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A crest of white hair like that of a cockatoo rose above his forehead. His eyes glittered behind thick lenses as he peered suspiciously at his visitor.

"Hey," he said at last, and his voice was shrill and harsh. "So you're Hercule Poirot, hey?"

"At your service," said Poirot politely, and bowed.

"Sit down—sit down," said the old man testily.

Hercule Poirot sat down in the full glare of the lamp. From behind it the old man seemed to be studying him attentively.

"How do I know you're Hercule Poirot, hey?" he demanded fretfully. "Tell me that, hey?"

Once more Poirot drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to Farley.

"Yes," admitted the millionaire grudgingly. "That's it. That's what I got Cornworthy to write." He folded it up and tossed it back. "So you're the fellow, are you?"

With a little wave of his hand, Poirot said, "I assure you there is no deception."

Benedict Farley chuckled suddenly. "That's what the conjurer says just before he takes the rabbit out of the hat. Saying that is part of the trick, you know."

Poirot did not reply.

Farley said suddenly, "Think I'm a suspicious old man, hey? So I am. Don't trust anybody! That's my motto. Can't trust anybody when you're rich. No, no, it doesn't do."

"You wished," Poirot hinted gently, "to consult me?"

The old man nodded. "That's right. Always buy the best. That's my motto. Go to the expert and don't count the cost. You'll notice, M. Poirot, I haven't asked you your fee. Send me the bill later. I shan't cut up rough over it. Damned fools at the dairy thought they could charge me two and nine for eggs when two and seven's the market price. Lot of swindlers! I won't be swindled. But the man at the top's different. He's worth the money. I'm at the top myself; I know."

Hercule Poirot made no reply. He listened attentively, his head poised a little on one side.

Behind his impassive exterior he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He could not exactly put his finger on it. So far, Benedict Farley had conformed to the popular idea of himself, and yet Poirot was disappointed.

"The man," he said disgustedly to himself, "is a mountebank; nothing but a mountebank."

He had known other millionaires, eccentric men, too, but in nearly every case he had been conscious of a certain force, an inner energy that had commanded his respect. If they had worn a patchwork dressing gown, it would have been because they liked wearing such a dressing gown. But the dressing gown of Benedict Farley, or so it seemed to Poirot, was essentially

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a stage property. And the man himself was essentially stagy.

He said again, unemotionally, "You wished to consult me, Mr. Farley?"

Abruptly, the millionaire's manner changed. He leaned forward. His voice dropped to a croak.

"Yes. Yes. I want to hear what you've got to say—what you think. Go to the top! That's my way! The best doctor—the best detective—it's between the two of them."

"As yet, monsieur, I do not understand."

"Naturally," snapped Farley. "I haven't begun to tell you."

He leaned forward once more and shot out an abrupt question. "What do you know, M. Poirot, about dreams?"

The little man's eyebrows rose. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

"For that, Monsieur Farley, I should recommend Napoleon's Book of Dreams, or the latest practicing psychologist from Harley Street."

Benedict Farley said soberly, "I've tried both."

There was a pause, then the millionaire spoke; at first almost in a whisper, then with a voice growing higher and higher.

"It's the same dream, night after night. And I'm afraid. It's always the same. I'm sitting in my room next door to this. Sitting at my desk, writing. There's a clock there, and I glance at it and see the time—exactly twenty-eight minutes past three. Always the same time, you understand. And when I see the time, M. Poirot, I know I've got to do it. I don't want to do it, but I've got to."

Unperturbed, Poirot said, "And what is it that you have to do?"

Benedict Farley said hoarsely, "At twenty-eight minutes past three I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it, and walk over to the window. And then—and then—"

"Yes?"

Benedict Farley said, in a whisper, "Then I shoot myself."

There was a silence; then Poirot said, "That is your dream? The same every night?"

"Yes."

"What happens after you shoot yourself?"

"I wake up."

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully. "As a matter of interest, do you keep a revolver in that particular drawer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I have always done so. It is as well to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

Farley said irritably, "All rich men have enemies."

Poirot remained silent for a moment or two, then he said, "Why exactly did you send for me?"

"I will tell you. First of all, I consulted a doctor—three doctors, to be exact. The first told me it was all a

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question of diet. He was an elderly man. The second was a young man of the modern school. He assured me that it all hinged on a certain event that took place in infancy at that particular time of day—three twenty-eight. I am so determined, he says, not to remember that event that I symbolize it by destroying myself. That was his explanation."

"And the third doctor?"

Benedict Farley's voice rose in shrill anger. "He's a young man too. He has a preposterous theory! He asserts that my life is so unbearable to me that I deliberately want to end it! But since to acknowledge that fact would be to acknowledge that essentially I am a failure, I refuse in my waking moments to face the truth. But when I am asleep, all inhibitions are removed, and I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself."

Poirot said, "His view is that you really wish, unknown to yourself, to commit suicide?"

Benedict Farley cried shrilly, "And that's impossible—impossible! I'm perfectly happy! I've got everything I want—everything money can buy! It's fantastic, unbelievable, even to suggest a thing like that!"

Poirot looked at him with interest. Perhaps something in the shaking hands, the trembling shrillness of the voice, warned him that the denial was too vehement. He contented himself with saying, "And where do I come in, monsieur?"

Benedict Farley calmed down suddenly. He tapped with an emphatic finger on the table beside him.

"Because there's another possibility. And if it's right, you're the man to know about it! You're famous, you've had hundreds of cases—fantastic, improbable cases! You'd know if anyone does."

"Know what?"

Farley's voice dropped to a whisper. "Supposing someone wants to kill *me*. Could they do it this way? Could they make me dream that dream night after night?"

"Hypnotism, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It would be possible, I suppose," Poirot said at last. "It is more a question for a doctor."

"You don't know of such a case in your experience?"

"Not precisely on those lines, no."

"You see what I'm driving at? I'm made to dream the same dream night after night, night after night, and then one day the suggestion is too much for me, and I act on it. I do what I've dreamed of so often—kill myself!"

Slowly, Hercule Poirot shook his head.

Farley said, "You don't think that is possible?"

"Possible?" Poirot shook his head. "That is not a word I care to meddle with."

"But you think it improbable."

"Most improbable."

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Benedict Farley murmured, "The doctor said so, too." Then, his voice rising shrilly again, he cried out, "But why do I have this dream? Why? Why?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

Benedict Farley said abruptly, "You're sure you've never come across anything like this in your experience?"

"Never."

"That's what I wanted to know."

Delicately, Hercule Poirot cleared his throat. "You permit," he said, "a question?"

"What is it? What is it? Say what you like."

"Who is it you suspect of wanting to kill you?"

"Nobody. Nobody at all."

Poirot persisted, "But the idea presented itself to your mind?"

"I wanted to know if it was a possibility."

"Speaking from my own experience, I should say, no. Have you ever been hypnotized, by the way?"

"Of course not. D'you think I'd lend myself to such tomfoolery?"

"Then I think one can say that your theory is definitely improbable."

"But the dream, you fool—the dream!"

"The dream is certainly remarkable," said Poirot thoughtfully. "I should like to see the scene of this drama—the desk, the clock, the revolver."

"Of course. I'll take you next door."

Wrapping the folds of his dressing gown round him, the old man half rose from his chair. Then suddenly he resumed his seat.

"No," he said. "There's nothing to see there. I've told you all there is to tell."

"But I should like to see for myself."

Benedict Farley snapped out, "There's no need. You've given me your opinion."

Poirot shrugged. "As you please." He rose. "I am sorry, M. Farley, that I have not been able to be of assistance to you."

Benedict Farley was staring straight ahead of him.

"Don't want a lot of hanky-pankying around," he growled out. "I've told you the facts; you can't make anything of them. That closes the matter. You can send me in a bill for a consultation fee."

"I shall not fail to do so," said the detective dryly. He walked toward the door.

"Stop a minute." The millionaire called him back. "That letter—I want it."

Poirot's eyebrows rose. He drew out a folded sheet and handed it to the old man. The latter scrutinized it, then put it down on the table beside him with a nod.

Once more Hercule Poirot walked to the door. He was puzzled. His busy mind was going over and over the story he had been told. Yet in the midst of his mental preoccupation, a nagging sense of something

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wrong obtruded itself. And that something had to do with himself, not with Benedict Farley.

With his hand on the doorknob, his mind cleared. He, Hercule Poirot, had been guilty of an error! He turned back once more.

"A thousand pardons! In the interest of your problem, I have committed a folly! That letter I handed to you—by mischance I put my hand into my right-hand pocket—"

"What's all this? What's all this?"

"The letter that I handed you just now—an apology from my laundress concerning the treatment of my collars." Poirot was smiling, apologetic. He dipped into his left-hand pocket. "This is your letter."

Benedict Farley snatched at it and grunted. "Why the devil don't you mind what you're doing?"

Poirot retrieved his laundress' communication, apologized gracefully once more, and left the room.

The butler was in the hall below, waiting to let him out.

"Can I get you a taxi, sir?"

"No, I thank you. The night is fine. I will walk."

Hercule Poirot stopped a moment on the sidewalk, waiting for a pause in the traffic to cross the busy street.

A frown creased his forehead. "No," he said to himself. "I do not understand at all. Nothing makes sense. Regrettable to have to admit it, but I, Hercule Poirot, am completely baffled."

The second act followed a week later. It opened with a telephone call from John Stillingfleet, M.D.

He said, with a lack of medical decorum, "That you, Poirot, old horse? Stillingfleet here."

"Ah, yes, my friend. What is it?"

"I'm speaking from Northway House—Benedict Farley's."

"Ah, yes?" Poirot's voice quickened with interest. "What of Mr. Farley?"

"Farley's dead. Shot himself this afternoon."

There was a pause, then Poirot said, "Yes."

"I notice you're not overcome with surprise. Know something about it, old horse?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Well, it isn't brilliant deduction or telepathy or anything like that. We found a note from Farley to you, making an appointment about a week ago. Perhaps you'd come round?"

"I will come immediately."

"Good for you, old boy. Some dirty work at the crossroads, eh?"

Poirot merely repeated that he would set forth immediately.

"Don't want to spill the beans over the telephone? Quite right. So long."

A quarter of an hour later, Poirot was sitting in the library, a low long room at the back of Northway House, on the ground floor. There were five other persons in the room: Inspector Barnett, Doctor Stillingfleet, Mrs. Farley, the widow of the

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millionaire, Joanna Farley, his only daughter, and Hugo Cornworthy, his private secretary.

Doctor Stillingfleet, whose professional manner was entirely different from his telephonic style, was a tall, long-faced young man of thirty. Mrs. Farley was obviously much younger than her husband. She was a handsome dark-haired woman. Her mouth was hard and her black eyes gave no clue to her emotions. She appeared perfectly self-possessed.

Joanna Farley had fair hair and a freckled face. The prominence of her nose and chin was clearly inherited from her father. Her eyes were intelligent and shrewd.

Hugo Cornworthy was a somewhat colorless young man, very correctly dressed. He seemed intelligent and efficient.

Poirot narrated simply the circumstances of his visit and the story told to him by Benedict Farley. He could not complain of any lack of interest.

"Most extraordinary story I've ever heard!" said the Inspector. "A dream, eh? . . . Did you know anything about this, Mrs. Farley?"

She bowed her head. "My husband mentioned it to me. It upset him very much. I—I told him it was indigestion—his diet, you know, was very peculiar—and suggested his calling in Doctor Stillingfleet."

That young man shook his head. "He didn't consult me. From M. Poirot's story, I gather he went to Harley Street."

"I would like your advice on that point, Doctor," said Poirot. "Mr. Farley told me that he consulted three specialists. What do you think of the theories they advanced?"

Stillingfleet frowned. "It's difficult to say. You've got to take into account that what he passed on to you wasn't exactly what had been said to him. It was a layman's interpretation."

"You mean he had got the phraseology wrong?"

"Not exactly. I mean they would put a thing to him in professional terms, he'd get the meaning a little distorted, and then he'd recast it in his own language."

"So that what he told me was not really what the doctors said."

"He's just got it all a little wrong, if you know what I mean."

"Is it known whom he consulted?" Poirot asked.

Mrs. Farley shook her head.

Joanna Farley spoke up, "None of us had any idea he had consulted anyone."

Poirot said, "Did he speak to you about his dream?"

The girl shook her head.

"And you, Mr. Cornworthy?"

"No, he said nothing at all. I took down the letter to you at his dictation, but I had no idea as to why he wished to consult you. I thought it might possibly have something to do with some business irregularity."

Poirot asked, "And now as to the

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actual facts of Mr. Farley's death?"

When no one spoke, Inspector Barnett took upon himself the role of spokesman.

"Mr. Farley was in the habit of working in his own room on the first floor every afternoon. I understand that there was a big merger of businesses in prospect—"

He looked at Hugo Cornworthy, who said, "Consolidated Coach Lines."

"In connection with that," continued Barnett, "Mr. Farley had agreed to give an interview to two members of the press. He seldom did anything of the kind, I understand. Accordingly, two reporters arrived at a quarter past three by appointment. They waited outside Mr. Farley's door—which was the customary place for people to wait who had an appointment with Mr. Farley. At twenty past three, a messenger arrived from the office of Consolidated Coach Lines with some urgent papers. On his leaving, Mr. Farley accompanied him to the door of the room, and from there spoke to the two members of the press.

"He said, 'I am sorry, gentlemen, to have to keep you waiting, but I have some urgent business to attend to. I will be as quick as I can.'

"The two gentlemen, Mr. Adams and Mr. Stoddart, assured Mr. Farley that they would await his convenience. He went back into his room, shut the door, and was never seen alive again."

"Continue," said Poirot.

"At a little after four o'clock," went on the Inspector, "Mr. Cornworthy here came out of his room, which is next door to Mr. Farley's, and was surprised to see the two reporters still waiting. He wanted Mr. Farley's signature on some letters and thought he had also better remind him that these two gentlemen were waiting. He accordingly went into Mr. Farley's room. To his surprise, he at first thought the room was empty. Then he caught sight of a boot sticking out behind the desk, which is placed in front of the window. He found Mr. Farley lying there dead, a revolver beside him.

"Mr. Cornworthy hurried out of the room and directed the butler to ring up Doctor Stillingfleet. By the latter's advice, Mr. Cornworthy also informed the police."

Poirot asked, "Was the shot heard by anyone?"

"No. The traffic is very noisy here and the landing window was open. It would be most unlikely if it had been noticed."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "What time is it supposed he died?" he asked.

Stillingfleet said, "I examined the body as soon as I got here—that is, at thirty-two minutes past four. Mr. Farley had been dead at least an hour."

Poirot's face was very grave. "So then, it seems possible that his death

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ould have occurred at twenty-ight minutes past three."

"Exactly," said Stillingfleet.

"Any finger marks on the re-olver?"

"Yes, his own."

"And the revolver itself?"

The Inspector took up the tale. Was one which he kept in the rawer of his desk, just as he told ou. Mrs. Farley has identified it ositively. Moreover, you under-:and, there is only one entrance to he room—the door giving onto the nding. The two reporters were tting exactly opposite that door, nd they swear that no one entered ie room from the time Mr. Farley oke to them until Mr. Corn-orthy went in at a little after four 'clock."

"So that there is every reason to ippose that Mr. Farley committed iicide?"

Inspector Barnett smiled a little. There would have been no doubt t all, but for one point."

"And that?"

"The letter written to you."

Poirot smiled too. "I see! Where Iercule Poirot is concerned, imme-iately the suspicion of murder rises!"

"Precisely," said the Inspector ryly. "However, after your clear-ig up of the situation—"

Poirot interrupted him, "One ttle minute." He turned to Mrs. 'arley. "Had your husband ever een hypnotized?"

"Never."

"Had he studied the question of hypnotism? Was he interested in the subject?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so." Suddenly her self-control seemed to break down. "That horrible dream! It's uncanny! That he should have dreamed that, night after night, and then—and then—It's as though he were—hounded to death!"

Poirot remembered Benedict Farley saying, *I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself.*

He said, "Had it ever occurred to you that your husband might be tempted to do away with himself?"

"No—at least—sometimes he was very queer."

Joanna Farley's voice broke in, clear and scornful. "Father would never have killed himself. He was far too careful of himself."

Doctor Stillingfleet said, "It isn't the people who threaten to commit suicide who usually do it, you know, Miss Farley. That's why suicides sometimes seem unaccountable."

Poirot rose to his feet. "Is it permitted," he asked, "that I see the room where the tragedy occurred?"

The doctor accompanied Poirot upstairs.

Benedict Farley's room was a much larger one than the secretary's next door. It was luxuriously furnished with deep leather-covered armchairs, a thick pile carpet, and a superb outsize writing desk.

Poirot passed behind the desk to

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where a dark stain on the carpet showed just before the window. He remembered the millionaire saying, *At twenty-eight minutes past three I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it, and walk over to the window. And then—and then I shoot myself.*

He nodded slowly. Then he said, "The window was open like this?"

"Yes. But nobody could have got in that way."

Poirot put his head out. There was no sill or parapet and no pipes near. Not even a cat could have gained access that way. Opposite rose the blank wall of the factory, a dead wall with no windows in it.

Stillingfleet said, "Funny room for a rich man. It's like looking out onto a prison wall."

"Yes," said Poirot. He drew his head in and stared at the expanse of solid brick. "I think," he said, "that wall is important."

Stillingfleet looked at him curiously.

"You mean, psychologically?"

Poirot had moved to the desk. Idly, or so it seemed, he picked up a pair of what are usually called lazy tongs. He pressed the handles; the tongs shot out to their full length. Delicately, Poirot picked up a burned match stump with them from beside a chair some feet away and conveyed it carefully to the wastepaper basket.

He murmured, "An ingenious invention"—and replaced the tongs neatly on the writing table. Then he asked, "Where were Mrs. Farley and Miss Farley at the time of the—death?"

"Mrs. Farley was resting in her room on the floor above this. Miss Farley was painting in her studio at the top of the house."

Hercule Poirot drummed idly with his fingers on the table. Then he said, "I should like to see Miss Farley."

Stillingfleet glanced at him curiously, then left the room. In another minute or two the door opened and Joanna Farley came in.

"You do not mind, mademoiselle, if I ask you a few questions?"

She returned his glance coolly. "Please ask anything you choose."

"Did you know that your father kept a revolver in his desk?"

"No."

"Where were you and your mother—that is to say, your stepmother—that is right?"

"Yes, Louise is my father's second wife. She is only eight years older than I am. You were about to say—?"

"Where were you and she on Thursday of last week? That is to say, on Thursday night."

"Thursday? Let me see. Oh, yes, we had gone to the theater. To see *The Little Dog Laughed*."

"Your father did not suggest accompanying you?"

"He never went out to theaters."

"He was not a very sociable man?"

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The girl looked at him directly.

"My father," she said, "had a singularly unpleasant personality. No one who lived in close association with him could possibly have been fond of him."

"That, mademoiselle, is a very candid statement."

"I am saving you time, M. Poirot. I realize quite well what you are getting at. My stepmother married my father for his money. I lived here because I had no money to live elsewhere. There is a man I wish to marry—a poor man—my father saw to it that he lost his job. He wanted me, you see, to marry well—an easy matter, since I was to be his heiress!"

"Your father's fortune passes to you?"

"Yes. That is, he left Louise, my stepmother, a quarter of a million free of tax, and there are other legacies, but the residue goes to me." She smiled suddenly. "So, you see, M. Poirot, I had every reason to desire my father's death!"

"I see, mademoiselle, that you have inherited your father's intelligence."

She said thoughtfully, "Father was clever. One felt that with him—that he had force, driving power, but it had all turned sour—bitter. There was no humanity left."

Hercule Poirot said softly, "*Grand Dieu*, but what an imbecile I am."

Joanna Farley turned toward the door. "Is there anything more?"

"Two little questions. These tongs were"—he picked up the lazy tongs —"were they always on the table?"

"Yes. Father used them for picking up things. He didn't like stooping."

"One other question: Was your father's eyesight good?"

She stared at him. "Oh, no, he couldn't see at all. I mean, he couldn't see without his glasses. His sight had always been bad from a boy."

"But with his glasses?"

"Oh, he could see all right then, of course."

"He could read newspapers and fine print?"

"Oh, yes."

"That is all, mademoiselle." As she went out of the room, Poirot murmured, "I was stupid. It was there all the time, under my nose. And because it was so near I could not see it."

He leaned out of the window once more.

Below, in the narrow way between house and factory, he saw a small dark object.

Hercule Poirot nodded, satisfied. He went downstairs again. The others were still in the library.

Poirot addressed himself to the secretary. "I want you, Mr. Cornworthy, to recount to me in detail the exact circumstances of Mr. Farley's summons to me. When, for instance, did Mr. Farley dictate that letter?"

"On Wednesday afternoon about five thirty."

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"Were there any special directions about posting it?"

"He told me to post it myself, and I did."

"Did he give any special instructions to the butler about admitting me?"

"Yes. He told me to tell Holmes—Holmes is the butler—that a gentleman would be calling at nine thirty. He was to ask the gentleman's name. He was also to ask to see the letter."

"Rather peculiar precautions, don't you think?"

Cornworthy shrugged. "Mr. Farley," he said carefully, "was rather a peculiar man."

"Any other instructions?"

"Yes. He told me to take the evening off, and immediately after dinner I went to the cinema."

"When did you return?"

"I let myself in about a quarter past eleven."

"Did you see Mr. Farley again that evening?"

"No."

"And he did not mention the matter the next morning?"

"No."

Poirot paused a moment, then resumed, "When I arrived, I was not shown into Mr. Farley's own room."

"No. He told me that I was to tell Holmes to show you into my room."

"Why was that? Do you know?"

Cornworthy shook his head. "I never questioned any of Mr. Farley's orders," he said dryly. "He would have resented it if I had."

"Did he usually receive visitors in his own room?"

"Usually, but not always. Sometimes he saw them in my room."

"Was there any reason for that?"

Hugo Cornworthy considered. "No, I hardly think so. I've never really thought about it."

Turning to Mrs. Farley, Poirot asked, "You permit that I ring for your butler?"

"Certainly, M. Poirot."

Very correct, very urbane, Holmes answered the bell. Mrs. Farley indicated Poirot with a gesture.

"What were your instructions, Holmes, on the Thursday night when I came here?"

Holmes cleared his throat, then said, "After dinner, Mr. Cornworthy told me that Mr. Farley expected a Mr. Hercule Poirot at nine thirty. I was to ascertain the gentleman's name, and I was to verify the information by glancing at a letter. Then I was to show him up to Mr. Cornworthy's room."

"Were you also told to knock on the door?"

An expression of distaste crossed the butler's countenance.

"That was one of Mr. Farley's orders. I was always to knock when introducing visitors—business visitors, that is," he added.

"Ah, that puzzled me! Were you given any other instructions concerning me?"

"No, sir. When Mr. Cornworthy

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ıad told me what I have just re-ɔeated to you, he went out."

"What time was that?"

"Ten minutes to nine, sir."

"Did you see Mr. Farley after hat?"

"Yes, sir, I took him up a glass of ıot water as usual at nine o'clock."

"Was he then in his own room or n Mr. Cornworthy's?"

"He was in his own room, sir."

"You noticed nothing unusual ıbout that room?"

"Unusual? No, sir."

"Where were Mrs. Farley and Miss Farley?"

"They had gone to the theater, ıir."

"Thank you, Holmes."

Holmes bowed and left the room.

Poirot turned to the millionaire's widow.

"One more question, Mrs. Farley. Had your husband good sight?"

"No. Not without his glasses."

"He was very shortsighted?"

"Oh, yes, he was quite helpless without his spectacles."

"He had several pairs of glasses?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said Poirot. He leaned ıack. "I think that concludes the ɔase."

There was silence in the room. They were all looking at the little man who sat there complacently stroking his mustache. On the Inspector's face was perplexity; John Stillingfleet was frowning; Cornworthy merely stared uncomprehending; Mrs. Farley gazed in blank astonishment; Joanna Farley looked eager.

Mrs. Farley broke the silence. "I don't understand, M. Poirot." Her voice was fretful. "The dream—"

"Yes," said Poirot. "That dream was very important."

Mrs. Farley shivered. She said, "I've never believed in anything supernatural before, but now—to dream it night after night beforehand—"

"It s extraordinary," said Stillingfleet. "Extraordinary! If Mr. Farley himself hadn't told that story—"

"Exactly," said Poirot. His eyes, which had been half closed, opened suddenly. Then were very green. "If Benedict Farley hadn't told me—"

He paused a minute, looking round at a circle of blank faces.

"There are three things, you comprehend, that happened that evening which I was quite at a loss to explain. First, why make such a point of my bringing that letter with me?"

"Identification," suggested Cornworthy.

"No, no, my dear young man. Really, that idea is too ridiculous. There must be some much more valid reason. For not only did Mr. Farley require to see that letter produced but he definitely demanded that I should leave it behind. And, moreover, even then he did not destroy it! It was found among his papers this afternoon. Why did he keep it?"

Joanna Farley's voice broke in,

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"He wanted, in case anything happened to him, that the facts of his strange dream should be made known."

Poirot nodded approvingly.

"You are astute, mademoiselle. That must—that can only be the point of the keeping of the letter. When Mr. Farley was dead, the story of that strange dream was to be told! That dream was very important. That dream, mademoiselle, was vital!"

He went on, "I will come now to the second strange point. After hearing his story, I asked Mr. Farley to show me the desk and the revolver. He seemed about to get up to do so, then suddenly refused. Why did he refuse?"

This time no one advanced an answer.

"I will put that question differently. What was there in that next room that Mr. Farley did not want me to see?"

There was still silence.

"Yes," said Poirot, "it is difficult, that. And yet there was some reason —some urgent reason. There was something in that room he could not afford to have me see.

"And now I come to the third inexplicable thing. Mr. Farley, as I was leaving, requested me to hand him the letter I had received. By inadvertence I handed him a communication from my laundress. He glanced at it and laid it down beside him. Just before I left the room, I discovered my error, and rectified it."

He looked round from one to the other. "You do not see?"

Stillingfleet said, "I don't really see how your laundress comes into it, Poirot."

"My laundress," said Poirot, "was very important. That miserable woman who ruins my collars was, for the first time in her life, useful to somebody. Surely, you see. Mr. Farley glanced at that communication—one glance would have told him that it was the wrong letter—and yet he knew nothing. Why? Because he could not see it properly!"

Inspector Barnett said sharply, "Didn't he have his glasses on?"

Hercule Poirot smiled. "Yes," he said. "He had his glasses on. That is what makes it so very interesting." He leaned forward. "Mr. Farley's dream was very important. He dreamed, you see, that he committed suicide. And a little later on, he did commit suicide. That is to say, he was alone in a room and was found there with a revolver by him, and no one entered or left the room at the time that he was shot. It means, does it not, that it must be suicide?"

"Yes," said Stillingfleet.

Hercule Poirot shook his head. "On the contrary," he said. "It was murder. An unusual and a very cleverly planned murder."

Again he leaned forward, tapping the table, his eyes green and shining.

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"Why did Mr. Farley not allow me to go into his own room that evening? What was there in there that I must not be allowed to see? I think, my friends, that there was Benedict Farley himself!"

He smiled at the blank faces.

"Yes, yes, it is not nonsense, what I say. Why could the Mr. Farley to whom I had been talking not realize the difference between two totally dissimilar letters? Because, *mes amis*, he was a man of normal sight, wearing a pair of very powerful glasses. Those glasses would render a man of normal eyesight practically blind . . . Isn't that so, Doctor?"

Stillingfleet murmured, "That's so, of course."

"Why did I feel that in talking to Mr. Farley I was talking to a mountebank, to an actor playing a part? Because he was playing a part!

"Consider the setting. The dim room, the green-shaded light turned blindingly away from the figure in the chair. What did I see—the famous patchwork dressing gown, the beaked nose—faked with that useful substance, nose putty—the white crest of hair, the powerful lenses concealing the eyes.

"What evidence is there that Mr. Farley ever had a dream? Only the evidence of Mrs. Farley. What evidence is there that Benedict Farley kept a revolver in his desk? Only the word of Mrs. Farley.

"Two people carried this fraud through—Mrs. Farley and Hugo Cornworthy. Cornworthy wrote the letter to me, gave instructions to the butler, went out, ostensibly to the cinema, but let himself in again immediately with a key, went to his room, made himself up, and played the part of Benedict Farley.

"And so we come to this afternoon. The opportunity for which Mr. Cornworthy has been waiting arrives. There are two witnesses on the landing to swear that no one goes in or out of Benedict Farley's room. Cornworthy waits until a particularly heavy batch of traffic is about to pass. Then he leans out of his window, and with the lazy tongs which he has purloined from the desk next door, he holds an object against the window of that room.

"Benedict Farley comes to the window. Cornworthy snatches back the tongs, and as Farley leans out and the lorries are passing outside, Cornworthy shoots him with the revolver that he has ready. There is a blank wall opposite, remember. There can be no witness of the crime.

"Cornworthy waits for over half an hour, then gathers up some papers, conceals the lazy tongs and the revolver between them, goes out onto the landing and into the next room. He replaces the tongs on the desk, lays down the revolver after pressing the dead man's fingers on it, and hurries out with the news of Mr. Farley's 'suicide.'

"He arranges that the letter to

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me shall be found and that I shall arrive with my story—the story I heard from Mr. Farley's own lips—of his extraordinary dream—the strange compulsion he felt to kill himself! A few credulous people will discuss the hypnotism theory, but the main result will be to confirm without a doubt that the actual hand that held the revolver was Benedict's Farley's own."

Hercule Poirot's eyes went to the widow's face—the dismay, the ashy pallor, the blind fear.

"And in due course," he finished gently, "the happy ending would have been achieved. A quarter of a million and two hearts that beat as one."

Stillingfleet and Poirot walked along the side of Northway House. On their right was the towering wall of the factory. Above them, on their left, were the windows of Benedict Farley's and Hugo Cornworthy's rooms. Hercule Poirot stooped and picked up a small object—a black stuffed cat.

"*Voila*," he said. "That is what Cornworthy held in the lazy tongs against Farley's window. You remember, he hated cats? Naturally, he rushed to the window."

"Why on earth didn't Cornworthy come out and pick it up after he'd dropped it?"

"How could he? To do so would have been definitely suspicious. After all, if this object were found, what would anyone think? Only that some child had wandered round here and dropped it."

"Yes," said Stillingfleet with a sigh. "D'you know, old horse, up to the very last minute I thought you were leading up to some subtle theory of highfalutin' psychological suggested murder? I bet those two thought so too! Nasty bit of goods, the Farley. Goodness, how she cracked! I rather like the girl. Grit, you know, and brains. I suppose I'd be thought a fortune hunter if I had a shot at her."

"You are too late, my friend. There is already someone *sur le tapis*. Her father's death has opened the way to happiness."

"Take it all round, she had a pretty good motive for bumping off the unpleasant parent."

"Motive and opportunity are not enough, Doctor," said Hercule Poirot. "There must also be the criminal temperament."

"I wonder if you'll ever commit a crime, Poirot," said Stillingfleet. "I bet you could get away with it all right. As a matter of fact, it would be too easy for you. I mean the thing would be definitely too unsporting."

"That," said Poirot, "is a typically English idea."

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TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL GAME

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

WELL, FOLKS, HERE'S YOUR old WIV announcer, Mal Malcolm, getting ready to bring you he highlights of today's big league all game. Coming to you from the Lions' Stadium. Yes, sir. The New York Lions and the Cleveland Tigers re all set to go at it again. This roadcast is coming to you through he courtesy of the makers of PAL-O-MINE Beer—the beer that's always a pal o' yours."

Malcolm's crisp, authoritative voice fills the broadcasting booth.

"As you know, the Tigers won he opener of this crucial three-game eries by the runaway score of 12 o 3 with the Lions coming back yesterday to take the second con-est, 6 to 2. So today the rubber game is up for stretching—either way."

Reporters begin to file into the booth in a steady stream.

"The Tigers want this game badly —they need it to pick up a vital full game on the Lions who are leading he league by only two and a half games. So the Tigers are going with heir very best today. Tom Teller s taking his warm-up pitches down alongside the Tiger dugout and the crowd is rippling with excitement. Can't blame them, can you? Big Tom is going for his twentieth win oday and the baseball season with ess than three weeks to go."

The tiny door to the broadcasting booth opens and a man in shirt sleeves enters, taps Malcolm on the shoulder, and thrusts a streamer of white paper into the announcer's hand.

Malcolm scans it with a practiced eye, grunts and whistles under his breath. His crisp, crackling voice enters millions of homes once more with a flow of easy, confidential power.

"Well, here's a touch of novelty, fans. I've just received an official bulletin from the Police Department. Listen closely. This is important. A truck load of wild animals bound for the Bronx Zoo has crashed on the Post Road not far from here. The driver, Max Zorn, is uninjured but his entire load of animals has escaped. Zorn, a trainer and one of the Zoo's personnel, told police that he was delivering a bunch of tigers that had recently arrived from India. Citizens of this area are warned to be on their guard. These cats are man-eaters. Large Bengals, easily identifiable by their size and their striped bodies.

"Every man, woman, and child is cautioned to stay indoors until these dangerous beasts are trapped and brought to the Zoo. Anyone seeing these animals is advised to get in touch with the Police or Fire Department nearest their home. Remember, don't be alarmed, and above all do not attempt to corner

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any of these wild beasts by yourself."

Malcolm chuckles good-naturedly.

"Well, how about that? I guess the circus has really come to town. Ha-ha. But don't worry. We've got a fine Police Department in this city and those escaped brutes will be back behind bars in no time at all. See if I'm not just right."

The other reporters in the booth laugh with Malcolm. Mal is a card, all right. He can make the grimmest news cheerful, the dullest game exciting.

"So much for Barnum and Bailey broadcasting, fans. Let's get back to today's game. We'll have the starting lineups for you in just a minute. The Lions haven't left their dugout yet and the ground-keepers are putting the finishing touches on the infield. We'll be ready to go any second now. Courtesy of PAL-O-MINE Beer—the beer that's always a pal o' yours."

Pause.

"Yes, sir, fans. The Lions are a swell bunch of athletes. Always in there, always hustling. You've got to admire them, fans. They give their best all the time, all year around. Just the way cool, delightful, delicious PAL-O-MINE Beer gives you all-year-round refreshment.

"Fans, at times like this, what do you do? Fret and worry about the next fellow or the other team? No, sir! Tell you what you do. Just dig into your refrigerator for a bottle of that soul-satisfying, reassuring, ever-pleasant PAL-O-MINE Beer—the beer that is always a pal o' yours. That's it. Drink it down. Feel the difference? Sure, you do!"

The early afternoon sun beats down on the narrow, cramped booth.

"It's a great day for baseball, fans, and the crowd out here is just r'arin' and roarin' to go. It's almost time. The home team will be coming on the field any minute now."

Pause again. Malcolm is suddenly serious.

"For you late tuners-in and those who have already heard, this bit of news is worth repeating. A truck load of wild animals has escaped on the way to the Bronx Zoo. So be on the alert and advise your neighborhood police station if you should see any of these jungle beasts."

A time signal sounds and Malcolm consults his watch.

"This is Mal Malcolm telling you you're listening to PAL-O-MINE Beer's play-by-play broadcast of today's game between the New York Lions and the Cleveland Tigers. You are tuned to Station WIV. Coming to you through the courtesy and best wishes of PAL-O-MINE Beer—the beer that is always a pal o' yours.

"Here comes the home team—the Lions are trotting onto the field."

Pause.

"Well, folks, we're waiting for . . . oh, my God! *Here they come—here come the tigers!*"

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Maxwell Oglesby, the ten-year-old son of the mayor, qualified for the role of sleuth by being a member of a breakfast cereal club and by sending in the requisite number of Crunchy Wunchy box tops, thus acquiring a badge and a set of detective tools. But what happened after that can only be described as a glowing chapter in the history of Great Detection . . .

MEET PRIVATE EYE OGLESBY

by MARTIN GARDNER

As I stood at the window of the dead girl's apartment and watched, the mayor's private limousine pulled over to the curb and stopped in front of the entrance. The chauffer got out and opened the rear door. The Great Detective emerged.

It was early fall, and leaves from the large elms along the roadside fluttered down over the Great Detective's hatless head of tangled brown hair. He was wearing a gray suit with long pants, and carrying a small black bag containing, no doubt, his scientific equipment. His height was about four feet, and he was ten years of age.

It was yesterday at headquarters when Mulrooney, Chief of Homicide, had given me this unpleasant assignment. During the past week I'd beaten the Chief fourteen checker games in a row. I suspect that had something to do with my getting the job instead of Lieutenant Hunnecker.

"Sergeant Stackpole," the Chief had said, grinning around his cigar and clapping me on the shoulder, "how would you like to take care of the major's son tomorrow? He wants to look over the Smith girl's apartment."

My cigarette almost fell out of my mouth. "Don't tell me," I said, "that that skinny little genius with the big I.Q. has given up chess and taken up crime detection!"

Mulrooney nodded. "He belongs to some sort of breakfast cereal club. You send in so many box tops of Crunchy Wunchies and you get a badge and a set of detective tools."

"That's great," I said. "Why don't you let Lieutenant Hunnecker handle the kid? It's his case."

The Chief eased his 250 pounds into the swivel chair behind his desk and leaned back. "Hunnecker's too busy. You're the only man on the force not doing anything. Mayor Oglesby called me about it this morning. He wants to please the lad. He says he'll consider it a personal favor if we let the boy

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prowl around the apartment a few hours to look for clues."

"And what if Master Crunchy Wunchy starts ripping the furniture apart looking for atom bomb plans?" I said sourly.

"Good boy!" said Mulrooney, slapping the desk with his huge palm. "I knew you wouldn't mind. If he gets out of hand, use your own judgment."

"I'll punchy wunchy him in the nose," I said.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Mulrooney shook his head and waggled a fat index finger. "You know how Mayor Oglesby's been feeling lately!"

In the hallway outside the Chief's office I ran into Lieutenant Hunnecker.

"Just the man I want to see, Stackpole," he said. "What's the name of that fence who runs a pawnshop on First Street?"

"You mean Charley Grimm?"

"That's the guy! Remember the address?"

I found an empty envelope in my pocket and jotted down Grimm's name and address on it. "Still looking for the missing jewelry?"

He nodded. "Craziest case I ever worked on. We don't even know there was any jewelry, and here I am knocking myself out looking for it!"

"You're lucky," I said.

The next afternoon I got to the apartment of the murdered girl about a half hour ahead of young Oglesby, which gave me time to give the place a once-over myself. I examined the strongbox where Miss Smith was believed to have kept her jewels. It looked as if it had been pried open with a screwdriver.

Just before the mayor's car arrived, a loose button popped off my coat. It took several minutes to find where it rolled to on the carpet. I put the button in my trouser pocket, then walked to the window in time to see the mayor's car pull up. When the doorbell rang, I went downstairs and opened the front door.

"I'm Private Eye Oglesby," the kid said, giving me a flash of the tin badge under his lapel. He put down his bag and stuck out a small bony hand.

"Glad to meet you, Oglesby," I said. "I'm Sergeant Stackpole."

He grabbed my hand so that the little fingers interlocked, gave it three quick shakes, then bent forward and whispered, "Crunchy Wunchies."

I must have seemed startled.

"That's the secret handshake," he explained, looking up at me through a pair of black horn-rims. "You're supposed to say the password too."

"I can't," I said. "I'm not a member of the club. I'm just a city cop."

"Oh," he said. Then he grinned. A tooth was missing in front. "It's a silly club anyway—mostly for kids

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who don't know much about criminal investigation."

When we got to Miss Smith's sitting room, young Oglesby put down his bag and perched himself on the edge of one of the easy chairs. He put his fingertips together and blinked a few times.

"Pray state the essential facts," he said.

I sat in one of the other chairs and tried to keep a straight face. "There's not much to tell," I said. "You've probably read about it already."

Young Oglesby nodded gravely. "How did he get in?"

"He probably had a key. One of Miss Smith's lady friends was visiting her that night and stayed until after one a.m. When she left, Miss Smith locked the door. It was locked the next morning when the maid came in."

He asked me several other questions. They were good questions. Then he sat silently for a while, pulling on the lobe of his left ear.

"I got this from Nayland Smith," he said, looking at me over the top of his horn-rims.

"You got what?" I said.

"This habit of pulling my ear when I'm thinking."

"Who's Nayland Smith?"

He looked surprised. "Haven't you ever read the Dr. Fu Manchu books?"

I shook my head. "I don't have much time for books, Crunchy Wunchy."

"My name," he snapped, glaring at me through his thick glasses, "is Maxwell Oglesby."

"Okay, Maxwell," I said. "You look the place over and see if you can find anything the police missed. If you need any help, let me know."

He nodded, gave me a side-glance, then got up and carried his bag over to a table. Out of it he took a large magnifying glass, a tape measure, a pair of callipers, several small bottles with atomizer attachments, and about a dozen white envelopes.

"What are the envelopes for?" I asked.

"Clues," he said. "I got the idea from Dr. Thorndyke."

"Who's Dr. Thorndyke?"

He looked exasperated. "Friend of mine," he said sarcastically.

I took him into the bedroom and showed him where the body was found and where Miss Smith kept her strongbox. I thought he would prefer not to have me watch him at work—I might learn some of his secret methods—so I went back to the sitting room to read a paper I'd brought along. I hadn't been following the case closely, so I read the front page story about it pretty carefully to see if I'd given the kid any bum dope.

Twenty minutes went by, then Maxwell came into the living room with an envelope in his hand. He walked over to me.

"Have you been in the apartment before today?" he said.

I shook my head.

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He pulled on his ear and gave me a long funny look. Then he sealed the envelope, scribbled something on the outside, and put it in his bag. He didn't tell me what he had found.

After he'd gone back to the bedroom, I tiptoed over to the bag to see what he'd written, but it was in secret code. The envelope felt as if it contained a coin about the size of a nickel.

I was in the middle of the sports section when he popped into the room with another envelope. He had taken off his coat and tie, and rolled up his sleeves.

"Know anything about Charley Grimm's pawnshop?" he asked.

The question must have left me speechless, because he had to repeat it.

"Yeah," I said at last. "But how do *you* know about it?"

"I'll explain later," he said.

He produced a small pad of paper and asked me to write down the pawnshop's address. After I did this he studied the address carefully for almost a minute. "Hmmm," he said. "Very interesting."

He folded the paper and stuck it it in a third envelope, then wrote something in code on the outside.

"Has anybody handled the strongbox since the crime?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Of course, the fingerprint experts have gone over it. But I don't think they found anything. What made you think of Charley's pawnshop?"

He didn't answer. He tugged on his ear and started to leave, then he came back and picked up his bag. I think he suspected I might try to get into his envelopes.

I started to follow him into the bedroom, but he told me flatly he'd rather I waited outside until he finished. I shrugged and went back to my chair. His remark about Charley Grimm made me curious. Maybe Crunchy Wunchy was really finding things!

He emerged from the bedroom about fifteen minutes later carrying a glass of water.

"Care for a drink, Sergeant?" he said.

As a matter of fact I *was* a little thirsty, but I wondered what prompted this sudden gesture of politeness. Maybe he felt sorry for not letting me into the bedroom.

While I drank the water I noticed his hands were covered with white powder. When I asked him about it, he shook his head mysteriously.

"Tell you later," was the most I could get out of him.

He was in the bedroom another half hour, then I heard water running in the bathroom. When he came out this time, he had his coat and tie back on and was carrying his bag. The powder had been cleaned off his hands. He put down the bag and walked over to my chair. There was an odd smile on his face.

"Do you carry a gun, Sergeant?" he said.

I opened my coat to show him my

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shoulder holster. He wanted to see the revolver. I took it out, made sure the safety catch was on, and handed it to him. He turned it about in his thin hands.

"Is there a safety catch?" he asked.

I showed him how it operated.

Suddenly the gun was yanked out of my grasp. When I looked up he was standing about six feet away, his eyes narrowed to slits. The revolver was pointed straight at my solar plexus!

"Don't move, Sarge," he said firmly. "I've got you covered!"

I started to get up, thinking it was some kind of prank, then I noticed the safety catch was flipped off. The kid must be crazy! I decided I'd better play it safe.

"What's the big idea, Maxwell?" I asked.

"You'll find out," he said.

He sidled over to the telephone, keeping the muzzle trained on me, and took the phone off the cradle. "Police Department," he said.

I started to get up again, but he shoved the gun toward me and I sat down fast. I could feel little beads of perspiration creeping down my forehead.

In a few moments, he had Chief Mulrooney on the line. "This is Sergeant Stackpole," he said, giving a fair imitation of my voice. "I've got the murderer of Miss Smith . . . We're in the apartment . . . Okay." He dropped the phone back into the cradle while I started at him bug-eyed.

"I had to do that," he explained apologetically. "The Chief wouldn't come if he thought it was just me."

I'll not try to describe the faces of Mulrooney and Hunnecker when they walked into the room. After the Chief got over the first shock, he broke into such a hearty guffaw that the windowpanes rattled. Hunnecker stood by and grinned.

Then the Chief closed the door carefully and locked it. He took my gun away from young Oglesby and passed it over to the lieutenant.

"Keep the prisoner covered," he said to Hunnecker, "while we hear Detective Oglesby's story."

I sat there and ground my teeth. Maxwell stood up, adjusted his glasses, and cleared his throat.

He had, he said, three clues that proved I was the murderer. He opened his bag and took out three envelopes. From the first envelope he extracted a brown button.

"You'll perceive, Chief," he said, "that the lower button on Sergeant Stackpole's coat is missing. This button matches the others on his coat. I found it under the bed where Miss Smith was murdered."

I dug into my left trouser pocket. "Holy Moses!" I said. "There's a hole in my pocket!" I tried to explain how I lost the button.

The Chief leaned back and chuckled. "A likely story if ever I heard one," he said.

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Hunnecker shook his head. "No jury will believe it," he said solemnly.

I started to shout something, but the kid interrupted. "This," he said, "was in Miss Smith's wastebasket."

He had opened another envelope and taken out a crumpled piece of paper. It was the envelope on which I'd jotted down Charley Grimm's address for Lieutenant Hunnecker the day before.

From a third envelope Maxwell took the sheet of paper on which I'd written the same address an hour ago. He told how he got me to do this, then passed both items over to the Chief.

"Well, what do you know about that!" Mulrooney exclaimed. "It's Stackpole's writing all right!"

"That's the name of a notorious fence," Hunnecker commented with a poker face. "I'll bet that's how he got rid of the jewels."

I forced out a laugh, then stopped abruptly and said, "There's nothing funny about this at all."

Young Oglesby dashed into the bedroom. He came back with the strongbox and an empty drinking glass. He had blown a fine white powder over both of them to bring out fingerprints.

I listened open-mouthed while he explained how he tricked me into putting my prints on the glass.

"Both sets are the common whorl type," he said, like a professor giving a lecture. "They're identical on forty-three points. That's enough to convince any jury."

"And to think," said Mulrooney, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief, "that the day would come when I'd have to arrest a member of my own force. A terrible thing it is to arrest one of your own men for murder."

Hunnecker stood up and jangled a pair of handcuffs. But young Oglesby stepped in front of him and held up his hand.

"Just a minute, gentlemen," he said. "Sergeant Stackpole isn't really the killer."

This time all of us gaped.

"I just did this for fun," Maxwell went on, "to get even with the sergeant for calling me Crunchy Wunchy."

The Chief looked at me, then at the lieutenant, then back at the kid. "Well, now," he said, frowning. "This is an unexpected development. What about all this fine evidence?"

"It's phony," said Maxwell. "The envelope with the address is postmarked two days *after* the murder. And if he lost his button on the night of the crime, he'd have noticed it before now and burned the suit."

And then he uncorked a remark that turned my ears crimson while the Chief and Hunnecker howled. "Sergeant Stackpole may be dumb," Maxwell said, "but not *that* dumb."

Mulrooney was looking at him with new respect. "Do you have

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any idea who the real killer is, my boy?"

The kid nodded. "Probably Steve."

We let that soak in a while. Then the Chief said as gently as he could, "And who, might I ask, is Steve?"

"I don't know his last name," Maxwell said, "but he's a big businessman here in town. He was Miss Smith's latest boy friend. She was blackmailing him with some letters he wrote last year, and—"

All three of us jumped.

"Where did you get that information?" Hunnecker asked excitedly.

"From her diary," the kid said. He reached into his bag and pulled out a red leather-covered book. "It was in the back of one of the dresser drawers, under a lot of pink underwear and things like that."

The Chief snatched the book out of his hands, and we all crowded around to look. It was Rosalie's diary, all right, and it was filled with dynamite!

Now it was Hunnecker's turn to look humiliated. I snickered behind my hand while the Chief gave him a good roasting for not searching the dresser with more care. Then he turned to Maxwell.

"I'm going to make you a deputy officer for this," he said proudly. "Maybe you'll come down to headquarters some time and lecture to my men."

Young Oglesby grinned, showing the gap in his teeth, and said he'd be happy to do that.

It was easy enough to locate Steve. Confronted by the police, he broke down and confessed. The letters had been in the strongbox. Miss Smith demanded more cash than he could pay, and in a moment of desperation he'd determined to get the letters back at all costs. She had awakened while he was in the bedroom and he had killed her.

Private Eye Oglesby was very modest about his role in solving the case.

"Elementary," he told reporters. "The real credit should go to the brilliant work of Lieutenant Hunnecker."

As for me, I was so badly shaken by the gun episode that I had to take a week off to rest up. Just to make sure I didn't get any more assignments to take care of Crunchy Wunchy, I decided I'd better give more attention to my personal relations with Mulrooney. It's astonishing how much the Chief's checker playing has improved these days!

NEXT MONTH . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FLETCHER FLORA**

TITLE: ***The Satin-Quilted Box***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *What changed Miriam from a very plain woman to a very pretty one? The same thing that changes every woman—an inner glow. And what gives every woman an inner warmth and intensity?*

FOLK WHO HAD KNOWN MIRIAM Sterling for a long time were occasionally surprised to remember that she had once been a pretty girl. She may have been somewhat too thin, which had given her a deceptive look of frailty; but her flesh was nicely distributed on a frame of fine bones, and she had, besides, a kind of inner glow and intensity that made her quite appealing.

Having remembered this, these same folk were likely to realize—again with a mild feeling of surprise—that Miriam still had the basic ingredients of prettiness, and to wonder, therefore, why she was not considered a pretty woman. Her bones were still good, and her flesh was still firm, but she seemed, somehow, to have faded. Indeed, she gave a kind of spinsterish impression, but she had been married for fifteen years, and only the most perceptive understood that she was not really faded, as she seemed, but cold and hungry for want of love.

The truth was, she had married the wrong man and had been faithful for fifteen years to the wrong husband. Martin Sterling was a bully. He was not, however, a bully of the garden variety. He was abusive without ever raising his voice. He was menacing without ever making a direct threat. He was cruel without violence.

But even the most perceptive observer, noting the change in Miriam over the years, would hardly

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have blamed it on her husband. As a good husband, Martin took his pleasure only from his wife; but as a gentleman of some discrimination, he preferred the needle to the ax . . . .

It was Martin himself who first remarked on the new change in Miriam. It was not actually so much a change as a *reversal* of the change that had been occurring for fifteen years. Somehow, for some reason, she was recovering that inner glow and intensity that had always been, for her, the difference between plainness and prettiness.

Seating himself across from her at the breakfast table, reaching with one hand for his coffee and with the other for his newspaper, Martin glanced at her indifferently, as usual, and then stopped, his hands suspended in two directions, to peer sharply.

"What's come over you?" he said.

"Nothing at all," she said. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

But color had risen in her cheeks, and she had difficulty for a moment in taking a slice of bread out of the toaster.

"Why, you're almost pretty again," he said, "which is something I haven't been able to say truthfully for years."

"You haven't said it at all," she said, "truthfully or otherwise."

"Perhaps someone else has been saying it. Have you found a lover, my dear?"

She was about to protest hotly when she saw the sheen of malice in his eyes and the faint curve of contempt on his lips. Knowing then that he was deliberately taunting her, she merely shrugged and buttered her toast.

"You're being absurd," she said, hardly above a whisper.

"Well, never mind." His voice was derisive as he completed his movements toward coffee and newspaper. "You mustn't expect too much, my dear Miriam. It's wise to recognize one's limitations."

He read his paper and drank his coffee and ate his two eggs, and then he left for his brokerage office downtown, dressed impeccably in a dark blue suit and a dark blue tie with a thin diagonal pinstripe of dark red. After he was gone, she left the breakfast things until later and went directly upstairs to her bedroom.

It was a pleasant room with a high ceiling and pale walls and eastern windows that collected the morning sun and splashed it in patterns across the floor. It was, moreover, neat and orderly—everything in its place and rarely moved; for it had been a long time since she had shared the room with another person. But in spite of the bright cheeriness, the room seemed, like Miriam, faded and cold and somehow hungry.

She went over and sat on the edge of the bed, which she had made herself just after rising. Sitting with her ankles and knees primly together and her back and head erect,

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she gave the impression of waiting in anticipation of some sound or movement; and she was, indeed, engaged in a small ritual that had lately given her a measure of warmth and hope and pleasure.

She was waiting for release—the silent word of an inner voice that would tell her, at the climax of her anticipation, when it was precisely the right instant to do what she had come here to do.

Having heard the voice, she got up abruptly and went across to her dressing table. Kneeling, she took from a bottom drawer a small box quilted with satin and returned with it to the bed. She unlocked the box with a tiny key that she had been carrying in a pocket of her dress.

The box unlocked, she waited again, apparently for a second word from the inner voice; and then, with hands that suggested reverence, she raised the lid and removed a thick packet of letters. She began slowly to read the letters in the exact order in which she had received them.

The first letter had come on a Tuesday about six months ago. At first, on reading it, she had been offended and slightly angry, for it was a tender letter expressing the love of an anonymous writer. The signature, underscored, was simply *Devoted*.

For a minute she had considered turning the first letter over to Martin, but she had dreaded the certainty of his mockery, which would have been far worse than his anger, and she had quickly rejected the idea. But neither had she destroyed the letter. She had, instead, put it away in the quilted box, and in the next week, driven by a hunger that the letter's tenderness fed, she had removed it and read it at least half a dozen times.

The next Tuesday the second letter had come, and all the others had followed on that precise weekly schedule. Once the schedule had been established, she awaited the arrival of each letter eagerly, for she had lost her initial anger and instead felt a stirring and strengthening response to the tenderness of the writer.

Martin, at breakfast, had been right in a way. Miriam *had* found a lover. She did not know what he looked like, for he had never described himself. She had not known his name, for he had never named himself. She did not know where he lived, for he gave no address. She only knew that he had the felicity of phrase to express a gentle and enduring love in terms that warmed her flesh and awakened her heart. He often watched her from afar, he wrote, and she had begun going out more frequently and for longer periods.

Meanwhile, as Martin had remarked at breakfast, she had recovered the inner light and warmth that came from the feeling of being loved and wanted.

But now, after six months, there

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would be no more letters. The last one in the packet, the one that had come the preceding Tuesday, told her so. In her reading of the letters she had come finally to this one, and she took it from its envelope and read it again, lingering over each word, repeating in her mind the phrases that incited her to the most intense response.

I shall write no more, she read. *You must understand, my darling, that the time for writing is past. Now we must act. We must meet now or never. There is a small cocktail lounge in town where lovers go, and I ask you to come there at three o'clock on the afternoon of Friday next. That is three days from now, and you will have time to free yourself of any commitments you may have made. If you do not come, I shall never hold your hands and tell you of my love. I shall go away in silence and we shall always thereafter be alone, you and I, each in a separate place. Please don't let me go. Please come. The place is called the Candlelight Lounge, and I shall be wearing, so that you may know me before we speak, a white carnation in my lapel.*

And now it was Friday, ten o'clock in the morning of the day, and time was out, or nearly out, for indecision. She must decide definitely if she would go or not; but there was really no decision to make that had not been made instantly three days ago, and she knew, as she had known all along, that she would go.

Finally conceding this to herself, she began at once to feel the excitement grow and grow within her until she thought she could not possibly contain it for five minutes, let alone for five hours.

She returned the letters to the satin-quilted box, and the box to the drawer, and went downstairs again. She cleared the breakfast table and did the dishes and went about her light housekeeping as usual, because it was absolutely essential for her to do something, anything—and somehow time was endured, and somehow excitement was contained . . .

She bathed at one o'clock and began to dress at 1:30. She selected her dress and accessories with great care, but she was, even so, finished and ready to leave by two o'clock, which was too early; so she forced herself to sit down and smoke a cigarette.

She left the house at 2:15 and drove downtown to a municipal parking lot, where she left her car. From the lot it was only a short distance to the Candlelight Lounge, and she walked. She arrived there at five minutes before three.

Inside, the lounge was soft with shadows that were pricked here and there by the tiny lights of guttering candles. Additional light came from fluorescent tubing that ran around the walls just below the ceiling, and from the bright face of an electric clock behind the bar.

Miriam paused near the door until her eyes were adjusted to the

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shadows, and then she picked her way among tables to one on the far side. At this early hour there were only a few patrons in the lounge, and only one waitress on duty. After a proper interval the waitress came to take her order, but Miriam, looking up, shook her head and smiled.

"Not just yet," she said. "I'm waiting for a friend."

Her excitement was now so intense, was such a throbbing thing, so alive and aching in her breast, that it was a wonder to her that any words came freely from her throat. How could she speak at all? By what miracle did she even draw her breath?

It was now, on the bright face of the clock behind the bar exactly three o'clock.

Then she saw Martin. He was standing at the entrance, staring directly at her. In the first shock of seeing him she thought wildly of escape, of hiding where there was no place to hide, but he had caught sight of her and was walking toward her, and she realized she could not move.

She raged inwardly at the improbable coincidence of his coming to this particular place at this particular time, and she searched her mind frantically for an appropriate lie to save herself. But then she understood, as he came nearer, that there was no coincidence, and that no lie was necessary. His eyes were shining with a kind of unholy glee. His teeth were exposed in silent laughter.

"Hello, my dear," he said. "How sweet of you to keep our little tryst."

Strangely, she was neither angry nor afraid. She could only wonder at the devilish perversion of a mind that had conceived and executed such a cruel deception. She could only recognize in utter despair the depth of her own shame. But she was, in fact, quite calm and controlled, having died in an instant and being dead.

Gathering up her purse, she rose to her feet and looked down at him for a moment almost with detachment.

"Wicked!" she whispered. "Oh, how wicked!"

His amusement was rich and depraved. Walking away, she heard his mocking laughter behind her. His voice followed her, each word enunciated with stabbing precision.

"I shall expect my dinner at seven tonight—as usual," he said.

She seemed to be walking naked through the streets, but she did not care—for her shame was absolute and could not be increased. At the municipal parking lot she claimed her car and drove home. In her room she changed her clothes and sat down on the bed with her hands folded in her lap.

She must have sat there for a long time, much longer than she had intended, for suddenly she was aware of the clock striking in the

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hall below, and carefully she counted five strokes. It would be necessary to go down at once and begin preparing dinner if it was to be ready at seven, and she got up and went down and put a roast of beef in the oven.

Then she began to consider what should go with the roast, and she thought she would have, to start off with, a generous shrimp appetizer. Martin was quite fond of shrimp, and his appetite would surely have been whetted by the complete success of his cruel trick. Besides, the spicy sauce, with horseradish and all, would disguise the taste of the cyanide that she had discovered, some months ago, tucked away among the gardening supplies in the basement . . .

The doctor had come, of course, and the doctor had called the police, and the police had been, on the whole, quite considerate. She had spent the night in her own bed, and no one had disturbed her all the next morning. But then, early in the afternoon, a man had called for her with an invitation to come to police headquarters for a little talk, and she had gone with him, for she understood perfectly well that the invitation was really an order.

She now sat in a straight chair in a bare little room, and the only others in the room were a man in a corner with a notebook of some kind and another man whose name was Ryan.

Ryan was sitting on the edge of a desk and he smiled at her; he was young and nice and very friendly.

"Mrs. Sterling," he said, "there is no good in pretending any longer. You killed your husband, and we know you killed him. Isn't that so?"

She looked up from her hands, which she was holding quietly in her lap.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I killed him. I put poison in his shrimp cocktail. It's really rather obvious, isn't it?"

"It is. Did you actually believe you could get away with it?"

"I don't think so. No, not really. I just thought it would be better to let you make up your own minds."

"I see. Would you care to tell us why you did it?"

She looked down at her hands again, apparently considering her answer with great care; and when she looked up, Ryan was surprised to see that she was suddenly quite pretty. Color had risen in her cheeks, and her flesh seemed warmed by a kind of inner glow.

"I had a lover," she said. "I shall never tell you his name, but you will find some letters from him in my room at home."

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SEED OF SUSPICION

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

(*continued from page 39*)

Kent Murdock did not show the photograph and photostat to Rhoda Farnsworth, nor tell her how he happened to have them; he simply described them, and knew at once from her reaction that she knew all about them.

They were in the living room of her apartment overlooking the Common, and she was sitting on the sofa, her feet curled under her, her blonde hair piled high. She wore a pastel-gray hostess gown that looked custom-made. Her gray eyes were tired, like her voice.

"I wondered what had happened to them," she said.

Murdock did not like what he had to do.

"I guess Doc Carlton knew about them, too," he said. "He bought three portraits in the past couple of years. Was that the other reason why you couldn't divorce Farnsworth?"

She looked up as though not quite understanding, and he said, "You told me it was your pride that made you stay married."

"It was. For a while. I thought I knew what I was doing, and I wouldn't listen to what they said. They told me about the other girls and the things Lloyd had done and how he drank, but I couldn't make myself believe them. You see, I loved him, Kent," she said. "I suppose it was a sort of madness."

She made a little hopeless gesture. "I don't know when it was that I finally knew. I suppose it was a gradual thing, the crumpling of this spell he'd cast over me. But there was a girl from Providence and I'd come home unexpectedly from a week-end in New York and—"

Her voice broke. She controlled it quickly and said, "It doesn't matter, does it? I finally discovered that what I took to be charm and personal magnetism was nothing but evil and sadism. I should have divorced him then, but I didn't. That was where my silly pride came in. We shared the same roof, but that was all. Not until two years ago did I finally get the courage to act, and then it was too late."

"On account of the San Francisco thing?"

She nodded. "I'd been visiting a friend and was on my way home, and I ran into John Carlton. He'd been there a week while his ship was being refitted, and he was lonely and so was I and—well, I liked him. I'd always liked him." She sighed. "Somehow it didn't seem wrong, then, and happened in friendship

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rather than in passion. It would have hurt no one if it hadn't been for Lloyd."

She went on quickly, explaining how Farnsworth had happened to see them going into the hotel and checked the register, how he waited outside all the next morning, hidden in a taxi with a camera so that he could take their picture when they came out.

"You didn't see him?" Murdock said. "Or know about it?"

"Not until later, when I told him I intended to divorce him. He showed me the photograph and the photostat of the registration that he paid a clerk to let him borrow. He said if I sued for divorce he'd bring countersuit and offer those things as evidence . . . I've been paying him so much a month ever since.

"When I'm thirty I'll get perhaps three-quarters of a million, and he's agreed to give me a quiet divorce and the evidence, as he called it, for a hundred thousand. I should have been very glad to pay him," she said, "because there isn't any other way. I know Mrs. Carlton. She could not forgive John, and it would ruin his practice and his life. He really loves her."

She raised her eyes to meet his gaze, leaning forward a little as she spoke. "Will you give them to me, Kent?"

Murdock stood up, closing his mind to the haunting sound of her voice and to the pleading gray eyes.

"You're awfully worried about Carlton aren't you?"

"Because he's an awfully nice guy."

"So am I," Murdock said. "Even you thought so once."

"I still do."

"The difference is that somebody framed me for murder; I may still get tagged with it. And Doc Carlton's car was outside Farnsworth's place last night when I came out."

"Yes," Rhoda said. "I phoned him the minute I left you last night and asked him to hurry out there."

"Also, Carlton has a damned good motive and has been paying blackmail and—" Murdock stopped as the import of what she just said came to him. He leaned forward, staring hard. "What did you say?"

"I said I phoned John."

"And told him about the call I'd just got from Farnsworth?"

"Why, yes. Because I was afraid of what you might do, and I thought maybe John could do something to stop it."

She went on talking, but Murdock did not hear her. For he knew where Carlton lived, and was figuring how long it would take him to drive from there to Farnsworth's place, how long it had taken him, Murdock, to walk it, knowing now that here was one man who definitely had the chance to frame him.

His thoughts left his lean face hard, and Rhoda stood up, her gaze uncertain.

"What is it, Kent?"

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"Nothing," he said. "It's all right. I'll make a deal with you," he said as he reached for his hat. "If Carlton can clear himself, you can have the pictures. If he happens to be the boy I'm looking for, he'll stand trial for murder, and then the pictures won't matter much, will they?"

He did not look at her when he had finished. He couldn't. He walked swiftly across the room, into the foyer, and let himself out.

Bennett Thatcher's estimate of the time it would take to surrender Kent Murdock and have him freed on bail was reasonably accurate. For in just seventy-five minutes Murdock was formally arrested, appeared in court before a waiting judge, and saw the bail of $5,000 supplied by T. A. Wyman.

This done, he headed for police headquarters, and, bypassing Lieutenant Bacon's office, went directly to the Bureau of Records and consulted the sergeant in charge. An hour later he had found a file photograph that satisfied him, noting that the record attached listed eight arrests on charges of extortion and assault, and one conviction.

"Guy Vernon," the sergeant said. "Meathead, they call him. Meathead Vernon."

"Did he ever work for Rudy Yates?"

"Sure. Up to a couple of years ago he was one of Rudy's regulars."

Murdock thanked the sergeant, and before he quit the building he left word with the proper official that he would sign a complaint against Vernon if the police would be good enough to pick him up. The official said he would pass the word along.

After that, Murdock went to the *Times-Clarion* and tried to work, but it was no good. Too many of his friends came into the studio and asked too many questions. What at first had been merely embarrassing became increasingly annoying as time went on.

He finally explained things to Wyman and the City Editor over the phone, and they told him to go home and take it easy.

His apartment had a stale, flat smell, but it seemed good to be back. He stripped, shaved, and took a hot shower followed by a cold one.

When he had dressed he telephoned Jack Fenner at his office and spoke of Meathead Vernon. Fenner said he knew that individual and would see what could be done to locate him. Murdock hung up and called Rudy Yates. He wasted no preliminaries. "I'm looking for Meathead Vernon," he said.

"That's interesting," Rudy Yates drawled.

"He used to work for you. I thought maybe you'd know where he is."

"Haven't seen him in months."

"But you get around. You have friends who get around," Murdock continued, his voice clipped and

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direct. "If you locate him, have him phone me. If you don't, I think I can dig up some new evidence for the D.A. in that used-car case that never came to trial."

He hesitated. When there was no answer, nor any disconnecting click, he knew that he had scored. He hung up as Rudy Yates was thinking it over . . .

The drone of the door buzzer heralded further developments shortly before ten that evening. Yet he was not prepared for what followed, because the man who stood in the hall was Dr. John Carlton.

Carlton's brown eyes were steady and unsmiling. He wore a gray homburg. His Oxford-gray coat was unbuttoned and he kept his hands in his pockets as he walked in. He waited until Murdock had closed the door, and then he said, "I suppose you know why I've come."

Murdock knew, all right. His mind had been racing from the instant he opened the door, for the things he saw in the tight, round face had already warned him of trouble.

"I can guess," he said. "You've been talking to Rhoda, and she told you about the photograph and stuff."

"I came to get them."

"Okay." Murdock sounded as if this was unimportant. He said, "I was about to make a drink."

"I'd like the photograph first."

Murdock studied his caller. About thirty-three, he thought, sandy-haired, just beginning to put on weight after a year and a half of civilian practice. A practice, Murdock knew, that was doing nicely, owing largely to the prominence and social standing of his wife.

"Are you going to give them to me?" The words cut sharply across Murdock's thoughts.

"No," he said flatly.

"I think you are," Carlton said, and he took a revolver from his pocket.

Murdock looked at it, his eyes dark with scorn. "Either I give you the stuff or you shoot, is that it? And then where'll you be?"

"I don't have to shoot to kill." Carlton hesitated, and for the first time seemed uncertain. "A bullet in the leg would put you down and give me a chance to search you, and every inch of this apartment."

"And for that you'd probably get five years."

"It would be worth it."

Murdock looked at him hard, measuring the whiteness of the mouth and the desperation in the eyes, and knew that Carlton meant what he said.

"Maybe it would," Kent said. "I guess Mrs. Carlton would be very much interested to know the real reason why you bought three of Farnsworth's portraits."

"Give me that photograph," Carlton said, and took a step forward.

Murdock shook his head, his anger riding him again. "You've made a

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stupid play, Doc. You forgot one thing. You forgot that to have a photostat made you have to have an original, and the original of that hotel card you signed is still in the hotel files. I haven't got the things you want," he added, deciding a lie would do no harm, "but if I had and you took them, the minute you closed the door I'd call police headquarters. I'd tell them all about the motive you had for murdering Lloyd Farnsworth and show them how they could prove it by checking with the hotel."

He stood up. "Now beat it," he said. "And if you bother me again I think I'll tell the police the truth, anyway, just for the hell of it—" He broke off as the telephone rang and walked quickly to the table in the inner hall.

"Murdock?" said a low, hoarse voice he did not recognize. "Meathead Vernon. I hear you been looking for me."

Murdock glanced over his shoulder. John Carlton was still standing there, the gun in his hand but no longer leveled. Murdock said, "Yes," into the telephone, hunching over it, so he would not have to speak very loud. "Where are you?"

"That comes later," the voice said, "depending on how loud your money talks. I may have to take a quick powder, and I could use some fresh scratch. What're you offering?"

Murdock thought fast, mentally counting his cash, and said he could raise a hundred dollars; possibly more later. He listened while Vernon gave him an address, repeated it to make sure he had it correct.

"Yes, I've got it," he said. "Second floor, over the paint shop."

"And get this," Vernon said. "It'll be dark up there on account I'm going to be watching for you. Anyone comes with you, or follows you, the deal is off."

"Don't worry," Murdock began.

"I won't. Come upstairs, walk in the door on the right, and wait. If it looks okay to me I'll be in.

The telephone clicked off, and Murdock turned back to the living room. He was heading for his hat and coat when he remembered John Carlton. Intent on his telephone conversation he had heard no other sound. Now, to his surprise, the room was empty. And he was suddenly grateful that there was no need for further argument.

He called Fenner and told him where he was going. Fenner wanted to give him a five-minute lead, then follow, but Murdock talked him out of it. Meathead might have a lookout, who would spot Fenner, and this was one interview Murdock didn't want interrupted.

He had to walk to Boylston before he found a taxi, and then rode out Huntington for a couple of miles, turned left finally, and told the driver to stop in a block of one- and two-story neighborhood stores, now dark and deserted.

Across the street he saw a bakery

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and a meat market, and the paint store next to it. Above this, three windows of the second-floor flat mirrored blackly the street shadows. There was no light behind them, but there was a faint glow beyond the doorway, and as Murdock crossed the street he saw that there was a light of some kind in the second-floor hall.

He was thankful for this as he climbed the stairs, but when he reached the hall he stopped and listened. He did not know why.

He took a step and then another, heels echoing hollowly on the bare boards. He passed under the dangling ceiling light, and on some impulse reached up and unscrewed the hot bulb.

"Just to even things up," he told himself, and felt better as the thick blackness settled about him. He walked on, groping for the door, the tightness spreading through him and every nerve alert.

He found the doorknob and went in fast, stepping aside as he slammed the door behind him. It was well that he did, though it was probably his precaution with the light that saved him.

For, in that next instant, it happened.

There was no real sound; rather, it was a whisper of some sound, the shadow of some movement ahead of him in the dark room.

He moved instantly—away from the menace of that shadow, throwing himself sideways and down as a gun blasted the silence and a pencil-point of light flicked out at him.

Three times the hammering came before he hit the floor, and he was not hurt, but knew there were other shells left and did the one thing he thought might save him.

He groaned twice, miserably. He caught his breath and let it out in a loud sigh that was drawn-out, final. Then he lay still.

There was a thin, rough carpet beneath him. The fingers of his right hand touched a chair leg. He curled his fingers around it, hoping the chair would be light enough to handle quickly. Then he heard the sound of movement to his left, the measured, faintly brushing sound of steps on the carpet.

It was hard to stay there, to lie so still.

The sound of the steps came to him again, closer, but not close enough. They were passing him on the left. He waited, ears straining for some new sound.

When it came it surprised him. He heard the click as the door opened, and then the metallic thud of some heavy object striking the floor in the direction of the windows. After that, the door closed.

He raised his head, pulled himself to his knees, and let go of the chair leg, puzzled but weak with relief. On his feet now, he oriented himself in the blackness and then stepped toward the windows.

Outside, the street stretched emptily below him. A car raced across

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the intersection a half block away, and then the quiet came again. He realized he was too late. His man was gone.

For another moment or two he stood there, the perspiration dampening his face and leaking down his sides. Then he groped his way back across the room and found the light switch by the door.

He snapped it on, blinking against the brightness. Then he saw Meathead Vernon.

Meathead was sitting on the floor, legs bowed and the sides of his knees touching the carpet. His thick torso was leaning back against a shabby couch, and he had been shot twice in the chest.

Three feet away a revolver lay on the floor, and Murdock knelt beside it. It was a cheap, nickel-plated model of a forgotten era, and it was this that the killer had thrown down as he left the room.

When Murdock saw that the cylinder had been designed to hold five bullets he realized why the man had not lingered. He had shot Vernon twice and kept the other three slugs for Murdock, leaving the empty gun for the police to find and interpret as they pleased.

The thought of this shocked Murdock anew. He straightened. He got out a cigarette and lit it with trembling fingers. He walked up to Vernon and made sure he was dead; then he glanced slowly about the grubby, cheaply furnished room until he spotted the telephone on the magazine-littered table.

He walked over and picked it up. Because he had nothing to lose he asked for police headquarters. When he had spoken his piece he dialed the *Times-Clarion* number, telling the City Editor to send out a reporter and a camera.

Kent Murdock had plenty of time to think during the next twelve hours. There were intervals during the police investigation of the Vernon murder when he could isolate his thoughts and work on them, and there was additional time as he lay in bed trying to go to sleep. His brain took up the matter when he awakened the next morning, and by that time a pattern heretofore obscured began to reveal itself.

To clarify this pattern he went first to police headquarters, where he talked with Lieutenant Bacon and certain laboratory experts, and from there to one of the other city officials. At the *Times-Clarion* he checked assignments and made sure they were being covered, and then went upstairs and talked at length to some of the reporters before going into the library for further research.

After lunch he went to the *Bulletin* offices and sought out Gene Nye, the gossip columnist, who became readily cooperative and later took him into the "morgue" and told the librarian to give Murdock anything he wanted. As a result, it was nearly five when he

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telephoned Jack Fenner and said he would require the detective's services that evening. After that he called Thatcher.

The lawyer was still at his office, and he was immediately agreeable when Murdock outlined his plan. "I've found out quite a few things since I talked to you," Murdock said. "And if we're going to have a session with the Grand Jury next week I think you ought to know them. I want to get some people up to your place tonight and I want you to sit in while I chase them out in the open."

"I think it's a good idea," Thatcher said. "Who're you asking?"

Murdock told him, then said, "I wanted to be sure it was all right with you, and if so I thought maybe you would phone them. You carry more weight than I do."

"You talk as if you had something we could use."

"I have," Murdock said, "I hope."

And so, at nine o'clock that evening, Murdock and Jack Fenner, accompanied by a young *Times-Clarion* photographer named Eddie Geiger, pulled up in front of Thatcher's residence and piled out of the car. Other cars were already parked at the curb.

They were approaching the steps, when Fenner stopped suddenly and peered into the shadows.

"Come out of that!" he ordered; and then the bushes moved and out stepped a tall, slim figure, which, exposed to the light, proved to be that of a good-looking, bareheaded youth, wrapped in a camel's-hair coat.

"What're you doing there?" asked Fenner, taking an arm and turning the youth roughly. "What's your name?"

"Ah—Wordell," the youth said. "I'm a friend of—that is, I was just—"

"It's all right," Murdock said, remembering the name and its association. "You're a friend of Nancy Yates? . . . Good. You might as well come in."

The others were all there when Murdock stopped in the drawing-room doorway: Thatcher, spare and tall, stood in front of the fireplace, talking to Rhoda Farnsworth and Dr. Carlton, who sat on the nearby sofa; Nancy Yates and her brother, Rudy, occupied the matching sofa on the other side of the fireplace, but apparently they were not speaking, for each stared straight ahead. Murdock spoke to Eddie Geiger, turning so the others could not hear.

"Make yourself small, Eddie," he said. "I'll tell you when we're ready."

Then, as he started into the room, Nancy Yates saw Wordell, and her small mouth tightened. "You followed me," she said irritably.

Wordell colored, spoke defensively. "I wanted to know what was going on and—"

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Murdock cut him off. "It's all right," he said. "I don't think she needs to stay."

"I don't mind," the girl said. "I'd like to stay." And then her words trailed off, and Murdock had her by the arm and was walking her toward the door, signaling young Wordell to follow. The bickering of young people had no place in his plan.

Rudy Yates, complete with dinner jacket and carnation, was standing up when Murdock returned to the living room. "How long is this going to take?" Rudy said. "I've got to get back to the Club. And what's this about my sister?"

Murdock sat down where he could watch both sofas, noting that Jack Fenner had taken a chair near the doorway.

"I wanted your sister to corroborate certain statements of mine," he said, "but maybe you'll take my word for them. If not, we can ask her later." He glanced at Thatcher. "I thought you ought to know about this: Lloyd Farnsworth had a green metal box. He kept some of his personal papers in it, and he gave it to Nancy Yates for safekeeping. She showed it to me the other night and I happened to have a key that opened it."

Thatcher nodded as Murdock elaborated. He made notes on a pad of paper he had on the mantel, and Murdock went on, "In that box was an envelope containing some affidavits concerning a black-market indictment on a used-car syndicate. The case never came to trial, but Rudy knows what it's all about. He also knows how Farnsworth got the envelope. I can tell you about that when we discuss it later," he said, and watched the muscles harden in Rudy's flushed face.

Then he continued, "My point is that the envelope made an additional motive for murder. His sister was in love with Farnsworth, and she was going to Florida with him. Rudy found it out and went up there the other night and tore up the Pullman tickets."

"Who says so besides you?"

"The police," Murdock said, and met Rudy's angry stare with steady eyes. "They picked up those pieces and went over them for latent fingerprints, and found yours."

Thatcher made a note of that, nodding, his thin face impassive except for the narrowed, observant eyes.

"Rudy's car was parked out front when I went in," Murdock continued. "It was gone when I came out."

"So what?" said Rudy. "So what if I did tear up the tickets?" His voice was tight now. "When I finished with Farnsworth I needed a drink. I remembered a bar a block and a half away, and I wasn't sure I'd find a place to park when I got there, so I left the car and walked. I got my drink and came back."

"Can you prove it?" Murdock waited, and when no answer came

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he glanced at Rhoda Farnsworth and John Carlton. "There was something else in that box," he said to Thatcher, "that concerned Carlton and Mrs. Farnsworth."

Carlton stiffened and seemed about to speak. As though sensing this, the woman put her hand on his arm. She was sitting very straight now, her face pale but composed, her gray eyes somehow no longer afraid. It was as though she realized she must finally pay for her mistake and had found sufficient inner courage to make the ordeal bearable.

Murdock had to look away. He swallowed and his face was hot as he glanced again at Thatcher.

"I can tell you the details later," he said, "but for now you can take my word for it that Carlton had a compelling motive for killing Farnsworth, and Mrs. Farnsworth had the same strong motive, because she was involved and blamed herself for what happened." He took a breath and said, "She was with me when I got the phone call from Farnsworth the night he was killed, and as soon as I left she called Carlton."

Murdock went on, explaining how he had found Carlton in his car when he came out.

"The car wasn't there when I went in," he said. "But it could have been parked around the corner. Later, after he had tipped off the police, he could have come back to watch."

"Do you deny this?" Thatcher asked, looking at Carlton.

The doctor cleared his throat, but his voice was thick. "Not all of it. Mrs. Farnsworth phoned me, yes. But when I went to get my car I found I had a flat. I went up there as soon as I changed it, and I had no more than got there when the police car came. I didn't know what had happened, but whatever it was I knew I was too late. So I came back home."

Murdock stood up. He nodded to Fenner and to Eddie Geiger, who waited with his camera in the corner. "I can tell you the rest of it privately," he said to Thatcher, and gestured toward the study door.

Thatcher caught his meaning. "If you'll excuse us," he said to the others, and led the way, closing the door when Murdock had entered. He waved the photographer to a chair opposite the desk and settled himself in the one behind it.

"That's very interesting," he said. "All of it."

"I wanted you to hear it," Murdock said. "I wanted you to know what I was up against, once I really got down to thinking things out. I didn't get anywhere at all until Vernon was killed last night. This morning I thought I had three real suspects, and then when I got working on it I decided there was really only one."

"Three?" Thatcher let his brows climb. "Rudy Yates, John Carlton, and—Mrs. Farnsworth?"

"Not Mrs. Farnsworth."

Thatcher let the brows go higher.

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"Not young Wordell, nor Miss Yates, certainly?"

"No."

"Then who?"

"You," Murdock said.

Thatcher let his brows come down. He squinted across the desk at Murdock, his intent bright eyes revealing nothing. Finally he leaned back and chuckled. "You're not serious."

"You know I'm serious. You killed Farnsworth and Meathead Vernon, and if you'd taken a little more time you'd have killed me."

Thatcher passed a palm over his thinning gray-brown hair. His lips grew flat and colorless, and his voice got cold and sardonic, the way it always did when he tore into a courtroom opponent. "If you thought so," he said, "you would have come with the police."

Murdock shook his head. "I think this way is better. I had the others come"—he nodded toward the drawing room—"because I wanted to show you their motives, and why I finally had to throw them out and settle for you."

"Why did you—throw them out?"

Murdock took his time. His dark gaze was steady, his face composed; but inside he was jumpy because he was not sure his plan would work. Concentrating on the job before him he said, "Both Yates and Carlton knew Farnsworth had photographs or documents that would ruin them. With Carlton, it meant ruining his life; with Yates, it meant a jail sentence. They probably did not know where Farnsworth kept these things, but to kill him without getting them would be stupid, since on his death the evidence would surely come to light. I can understand them killing him for this evidence; I can understand Yates losing his head over his sister's infatuation and beating Farnsworth to death, anyway."

"But he didn't."

"No," Murdock said. "Because if he had—or if Carlton had—he would have looked for what he wanted. He would not have found it, because it wasn't there, but he would have looked."

Murdock leaned forward, measuring his words. "I had a chance to go over Farnsworth's apartment before the police came. It hadn't been searched. The center desk drawer was locked, but the others were neat and no attempt had been made to search them. And that's why I say neither of them killed him."

He hurried on before the lawyer could interrupt. "The man who killed him and framed me wasn't looking for papers or photographs; he was looking for just one thing—revenge. The trouble with me is that sometimes I'm not very bright. I didn't realize the importance of this until this morning. Oh, I knew I'd been framed, all right. The trouble was I didn't realize I'd been framed from the start."

He paused, but Thatcher had

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nothing to offer, so he said, "I guess you'd wanted to kill Farnsworth for a long time, Mr. Thatcher. And the other day you found the right way. You heard about the business at the Flamingo—or maybe you were there—and you knew I'd been seeing Rhoda Farnsworth, and you hired Meathead Vernon to do a job on me. You coached him in what to say, and you were providentially at hand to assist me and plant the idea that maybe it wasn't a mugging, while you suggested indirectly that perhaps Farnsworth was behind it. You took me to police headquarters, knowing I'd tell my story, and I think probably you waited outside and followed me home.

"After that you went to Farnsworth's with a gun, held it in his back, and made him telephone me and say what you told him to say. I doubt if he had the faintest idea of what he was doing. He was taunting me to come up and finish a job he knew nothing about, and when he hung up you hit him over the head with that candlestick. Then you finished him off and got ready for me."

Murdock laughed, an abrupt and bitter sound. "I was a pushover, wasn't I? Walked in, hotheaded, thinking Farnsworth and I were going to have it out, and you lowered the boom on me. You marked me up, skinned my knuckles, and walked out; if it hadn't been for a little break you would have got away with it."

"If the police had arrived a little sooner," Thatcher began.

"That wasn't what I meant," Murdock said. "I guess you had to get far enough away so no one would remember you before you went into a pay station to tip off the police; but the break I'm talking about is the taxi that came around the corner that first night and caught Meathead Vernon in its lights long enough for me to identify him . . . That did it, I guess," he said. "Once I knew who he was—and it was a cinch I'd find out, eventually—you had to kill him, too. And when you did, I knew Farnsworth hadn't hired him. I knew I'd been played for a sucker from the start."

Bennett Thatcher did not move. His narrowed, half-sleepy eyes never strayed from Murdock's face, but now, when he spoke, his voice had lost its bite. His tone grew softly speculative. "You said I'd probably wanted to kill Farnsworth for a long time. What makes you think so, and why didn't I?"

"Farnsworth had been back a couple of months," Murdock said. "I don't know why you waited, unless you wanted an ideal setup, but you didn't kill him before that because he wasn't in town. I think you tried to get him once before, didn't you, Mr. Thatcher? I think you've wanted to kill him ever since *the summer your wife committed suicide*—because of Farnsworth and the nude portrait he painted of her."

Kent leaned toward the desk,

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reaching for the telephone. "And before we go into that," he said, "it might be a good idea to get the police in and let them listen."

Murdock did not touch the telephone. His fingers were still a foot away from it when Thatcher's hand moved up from behind the desk and leveled an automatic across it. Murdock saw it coming, but he did not watch the gun; he kept his eyes on the lawyer's thin, gray face, seeing the dampness on the forehead and the way the man's jaw sagged before he tightened it.

He leaned back in his chair and let his breath out slowly, the fear beginning to build inside him—not just because of the gun, but because, having gone this far, he knew there was no turning back, nor any way out for him if he failed.

He had come here to put on his act with little more than native shrewdness to guide him, plus a psychology of his own that came from his long experience in meeting and studying people. He had facts, yes. But until this moment he had not been sure his analysis had been correct. He pretended the gun was unimportant.

"I don't think you'll need that," he said.

Thatcher did not seem to hear him. "You are right about Meathead Vernon," he said. "He was a stupid man. Someone—I believe it was Rudy Yates—got word to him yesterday afternoon that you were looking for him. He was pretty jittery when he phoned me, so I made a date with him. I told him the thing to do was telephone you and get you to his place and then take care of you. He believed me."

"He didn't talk like a man with gun in his back," Murdock said. "He sounded as if he meant what he said, and when he hung up you shot him twice. How come you missed me?"

"I don't know." Thatcher shifted his gun and wet his lips. "I didn't think I did. You gave a most convincing demonstration of a dying man. Perhaps I was confused and shot at your shadow," he said, and then his mouth dipped at the corners and his voice got sardonic again. "I think you are a little stupid, too, Murdock, for coming here like this."

"I could have come with a gun," Murdock said. "I've got Jack Fenner outside, in any case."

"He can hardly help you now."

"I don't need any help."

Murdock's voice was direct, forceful, and convincing. His confidence made Thatcher pause. "I don't follow you," the lawyer said.

"You think you've got two moves," Murdock said. "You can shoot me first and then shoot yourself—before Fenner does—or you can surrender and gamble as a lawyer that I haven't sufficient proof to convict you. All right; I'm offering you a *third* way, and I think you'll take it."

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"Why should I, assuming there is a third way?"

Murdock hesitated, knowing that his life depended on what he said. "I'll have to tell this my way," he began. "It'll take a little while and I probably can't tell it in a straight line. I'll even have to guess at some things, but you'll know if I'm right or not."

He paused, arranging his thoughts, and said, "It started this morning, when I knew that Farnsworth had not hired Vernon, when I realized that neither Yates nor Carlton would have killed Farnsworth without searching for the things they wanted so badly. I began at the *Times-Clarion*," he said. "A newspaper is like a library, in a way. In its files is a history of the territory it serves and its people. Some papers call such departments 'morgues,' but all have them, and I had an idea the things I wanted would be there.

"You see, I didn't know your wife. So I started digging. I talked with reporters who had covered her death and who knew you. I used the *Bulletin's* morgue and I talked with Gene Nye, who's been covering scandal and gossip for the last ten years. And this is the picture I got.

"Your wife was twenty-two years younger than you were when she married you. She came from a good middle-class family. Her folks didn't have much money, but they scraped together enough to send her to a small girls' school. They were old-fashioned, too, the way they brought her up. They were very strict. They did not encourage boy friends, and I doubt if she ever had much fun. She never really knew what boys were like, and when she got out of school she didn't know men."

Then you came along. You had money, position, a distinguished name, and when she married you, you became the first man in her life; the only one—until Farnsworth.

"You worshiped her in your fashion, but you were strict, too, like her folks, because you were jealous and afraid. You could give her all the material things she'd ever want, but because you were so much older you worried about other things, the sort of things a man cannot buy. You were less sure of yourself than a younger man, and always you knew how beautiful she was. You saw the way other men looked at her when you were out, and you watched her, trying not to think of what might happen if she found someone she liked better.

"Well, she found the guy, finally, Farnsworth. There's no point in going into *why* she fell for him. He had the sort of charm that had fooled older and wiser women than your wife, and she had nothing in her experience that could help her, because she knew no one but you.

"You said your wife gave you that portrait for your birthday. That's a lie . . . You said she died

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two months later, and that also is a lie. I'll tell you what happened, Thatcher. And these are facts, a matter of record.

"On the first of three successive days during that summer you bought that portrait." He digressed to tell of Farnsworth's red-leather notebook that listed the dates of his sales. "On the second day your wife committed suicide, and on the third Farnsworth left town."

"My wife died accidentally," Thatcher said, his voice husky, but the gun steady.

"Your wife committed suicide, and you know it. Look." Murdock sat up. "I've got friends at police headquarters and at the medical examiner's office. Doc Egan didn't want to talk today until I told him how important it was. He would never repeat what he told me on a witness stand, perhaps, but he knows.

"Because of your name and position, and because there was no insurance company involved, nor any question of murder, he accepted your story that your wife suffered from migraine, had awakened after taking some pills, and, not remembering, had taken more. He says there was no suicide note—if there was, you grabbed it—but from the number of pills taken he's convinced it was suicide."

He saw Thatcher lean across the desk and tighten his hand on the gun. The lawyer wet his lips before he spoke.

"You're smarter than I thought, Murdock," he said. "The trouble is, you're too smart. If I stand trial I guess what you say will come out. I don't want it that way. I made up my mind that no one would ever speak evil of my wife. I gambled and I lost, and it looks as if I'll have to pay. I can do that, too, Murdock, but first I'm going to make sure you never talk about my wife or her reputation."

Murdock knew he meant it, knew he had only one chance left. "No," he said, and shook his head. "I told you there was a third way, Thatcher, and this is it: you're going to write out a confession and sign it."

For the first time Thatcher faltered, and his frown tempered the intent, narrowed gaze. "Why?" he said slowly.

Murdock got ready to move should the trigger finger tighten. He said, "Because if you don't, there'll be a picture of your wife on the front page of the *Times-Clarion*, which will show her as she was when Farnsworth painted her portrait—without the dress, without anything."

He went quickly on before the lawyer could interrupt. "I was with the AMG in Italy as a Monument Officer. We had to do with preserving art treasures and looking up stolen pictures. We developed an improvement on the infrared method of photographing paintings so that we could be sure just what was underneath the picture on top.

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In the case of an oil, once the original picture has dried, it will show up, even though another coat of paint has been applied . . . You saw the photographer I brought with me, didn't you? Well, what do you think he's been doing?"

Without moving, Bennett Thatcher seemed to sag, as though all strength had gone from his body. "How did you know?" he asked hoarsely.

Murdock began to breathe again. He watched the gun waver and dip. He moved his legs, and they felt weak and nerveless as he explained how Jack Fenner had told him the rumors about the woman who committed suicide, how Farnsworth had painted a dress on a nude portrait while an irate husband was rushing up from the country.

"I hooked the two incidents up," he said, "after I'd talked with Gene Nye and the medical examiner. And then I went on from there."

Thatcher put the gun on the desk, but kept his hand on it. "Where's the photographer you brought?"

"He should be back at the office. He's supposed to phone me."

"What about the people in the drawing room?"

"There are no people in the drawing room. They've gone. There's no one there but Fenner now."

The tension had gone from Thatcher's face, leaving it flaccid and resigned. He sighed, and there was weariness and regret in the sound. Presently one corner of his mouth curled in a smile that was sardonic but without malice.

"I suppose you know I had every intention of killing you."

"It was a chance I had to take," Murdock said. "You protected your wife's name and reputation two years ago, and you've protected it since. I had an idea, feeling as you did about her, that you'd want to go on protecting her, once you knew there was no way out for you."

"You're right, of course." Thatcher unlocked a desk drawer and took out a folded sheet of paper. He struck a match, touched the flame to the paper, and as it burned in the ashtray he said, "That was the note she left me." He took out a small bottle, half filled with little pills.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I was the irate husband. She'd been seeing Farnsworth for over three months when I discovered it. I knew what he was like, and I'd heard about the nudes he sometimes did. I didn't accuse her then, but I said I was going up and find out. She must have telephoned him the minute I left—we were on the Cape that summer and it took me two hours to drive it—because when I got there the picture I saw was the one I have over the mantel."

He said, "I bought it on the spot, gave him a check, and called the express company to have it delivered. I did nothing more, then, but I was nearly out of my mind,

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thinking of the time it had taken her to pose for him and how they had been together, and when I got home I started in again."

He fell silent, distance in his gaze. After a minute he exhaled softly and said, "What happened then was my fault. I was tortured by jealousy and rage and I accused her of everything I could think of. I guess she must have still been infatuated with him, because finally she turned on me. She became hysterical—I had driven her too far—and suddenly she not only admitted everything but taunted me with Farnsworth's cleverness in painting the dress on the portrait. I hadn't known until then, you see, but she told me how she'd posed and said she was glad.

"I got a gun. I brought her to town with me. I took her upstairs and locked her in her room and told her I was going to kill him . . . I would have," he said, "if I could have found him. I looked for hours, until nearly daylight, and then I came back and found her unconscious, with the note on the table. I drove her to the hospital, but she was too far gone; they couldn't save her." He rubbed his hand over his face and said, "The next day when I went looking for Farnsworth I found he'd left town."

The telephone rang as he finished and he picked it up. "For you," he said.

Murdock said, "Hello," and listened to what Eddie Geiger had to say. He put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Thatcher. "What about it?" he said.

"Has he developed the negatives?"

"No. His orders were to develop them only in case I didn't show up."

"Then he doesn't know," Thatcher said. "No one knows but you and me? How much time do I have?"

Murdock thought it over. "An hour after I leave with your confession."

"And I have your word that you will destroy the negatives? . . . Very well. It's a deal."

Murdock spoke into the telephone. "Okay, Eddie," he said. "Just sit tight until I get there . . . No, I don't want them developed." He put the telephone aside and found Thatcher examining the bottle of pills.

"I guess I can't use these," the lawyer said. "With this new benzedrine antidote they'd probably pull me out of it." He stood up, taking the gun with him. He got some paper and walked to the typewriter table in the corner. "Do you want to write it, or shall I?"

"You write it," Murdock said. "You're a lawyer and you know how to make it stand up. You don't have to put in anything about your wife—just say the motive was a personal one that developed between you and Farnsworth since he returned. Tell how and why you framed me, and how and why you

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had to kill Meathead Vernon. I'll settle for that. I think the police will, too."

Thatcher sat down and began to write. For five minutes he hammered steadily at the typewriter; then he stopped and glanced up.

"I want you to know one thing," he said. "I never intended that you should pay with your life for Farnsworth's murder. With the setup I had I felt pretty sure I could get you an acquittal, and if T. A. Wyman hadn't called me in I would have offered my services." He grunted softly, a disparaging sound. "Most men in a spot like that would have been satisfied with an acquittal, but you had a stubbornness and integrity I hadn't counted on. You had to have a clean bill."

He sighed again and bent over the machine. Presently he began to type again . . .

Jack Fenner rode back to the *Times-Clarion* with Murdock, but he went only as far as the corner bar. Here they had a quick one and said good night, and then Murdock went to the studio. Eddie Geiger was waiting, and when he had turned over the film-holder Murdock told him he could go home.

That left him alone in the studio, and he took the two-page confession from his pocket and read it once more before opening the film-holder and exposing the negatives. He got out his lighter, touched the flame to the film, and watched it sputter and curl up into ash. He took the photograph of Rhoda Farnsworth and Dr. Carlton and added it to the fire, and when it was going again he put on the photostat of the hotel register.

When the flame and smoke were gone, he lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. He thought about Nancy Yates and young Wordell. He was happy that Rhoda Farnsworth could have another chance. He tried not to think about Bennett Thatcher, for he knew that before the night was over, the police would find him dead, slumped over his desk, and the papers would pounce on the story.

He was glad he would not have to cover the case. Tomorrow he could be philosophical and know that this was much the best way for everyone concerned, even for Thatcher; but tonight he felt lousy, and he knew that presently he would go downstairs to the bar and get another drink or two, and then go home and have a few more in the hope that he could forget for a little while everything that had happened.

But first there was another job to do. He glanced at his watch. Then, because he had no choice but to face the issue as he would any other unpleasant assignment, he picked up the telephone and asked for police headquarters.

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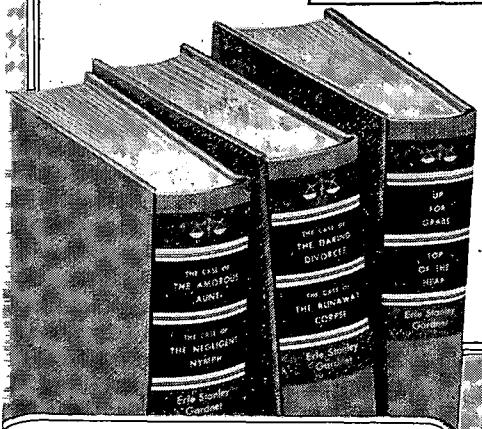
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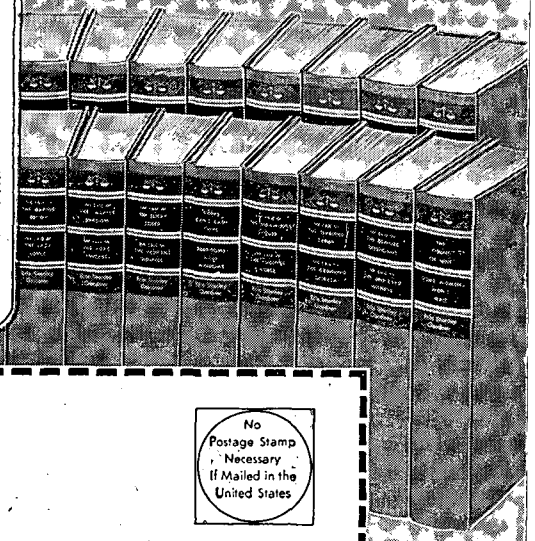

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